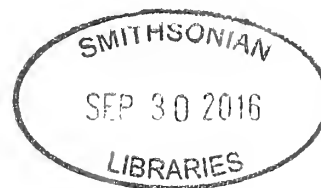


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The First Mesopotamian Crow for Arabia

During my daily monitoring of birds at Jahra Pool Reserve (NB35) on 23 October 2012, I started photographing from my car under a tower just after 7 am. After less than half an hour I heard a bird land on the top of the tower which I took to be dove or pigeon, which are common at the site, but less than a minute later I heard a crow calling loudly. I got out from my car and saw a crow flying away, which I was able to get some quick pictures of as it flew towards the city of Jahra. At first glance I knew that it was a Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix* because of the clear white area on its back and underparts, a view confirmed by reference to Porter & Aspinall, 2010 and discussion with Mike Pope and Pekka Fågel. The bird resembled the Mesopotamian Crow *Corvus (cornix) capellanus* which is a native to the Mesopotamian region between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers of southern Iraq and south-west Iran. This crow is distinguishable in the field from the Hooded Crow which occurs elsewhere in the Middle East region, in view of its much whiter body. It is sometimes considered as a separate species.

The crow was seen on several other occasions in Kuwait over the next seven weeks, mainly roaming in the vicinity of beaches, but it did not appear again at JPR until 12 November. Other observers between 12 November and 13 December were Omar Alshaheen, Abdulmohsen Alsuraye, Pekka Fågel, Ouda Albathaly, Mahmood Shehab, Fahad Alkhamees and Abdulaziz Alyousif. It was seen on the coast at Abualhasani (OA35), 60 km. south east of JPR, on 26 November by Abdulaziz Alsejary and Omar Alcassa.

Gregory (2005) included this species on a list of birds of Kuwait that required confirmation because none of the previous records, since 1957, adequately ruled out the House Crow *Corvus splendens*. This is the first record for Kuwait documented by a photograph and is subject to acceptance by the Kuwait Ornithological Records Committee. No other records are known from elsewhere in Arabia.

References: ● Gregory, G. 2005. *The birds of the State of*

Kuwait. Skegness, England. ● Porter R. & S. Aspinall, 2010. *Birds of the Middle East*, second edition. Helm, London.

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ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF THE MIDDLE EAST
THE CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA

OSME

Introduction

This year has been rather special for me as I achieved a life long ambition which was to visit Mongolia with my partner Carol. We did it the hard way driving there and back from England and taking six months to do it. The trip was a long time in preparation and there was much to do when I got back and because of this 2012 turned out to be the first year since 1984 that I have not visited any part of Arabia. As a result I had nothing new myself to put into *Phoenix*. Also, because I had my eye off the ball all year, when I came back from my trip in mid October I had nothing else to go in *Phoenix*. However a terrific rallying around of those working in Arabia and interested in the birds of the region has produced more than enough material in only eight weeks. Indeed by the end of December I was having to postpone material until No 30. Thanks so much to all those who pulled out all the stops and made a tremendous effort to fill up this issue at such short notice.

Unfortunately No 28 (January 2012) was not after all sponsored by the Saudi Wildlife Authority. I did receive a kind donation from Peter Hellyer in memory of Simon Aspinall, former Chairman of the Emirates Bird Records Committee and stalwart supporter of ABBA, who died in October 2011, but the unexpected personal cost of producing No 28 was nearly another reason for No 29 not appearing! I do not have a sponsor for this issue (No 29) either but I am very grateful to the Ornithological Society of the Middle East who came to the aid of ABBA and *Phoenix* yet again by providing a grant. This has enabled me to pay for the printing and postage of a good part of the distribution. The search is now on for a permanent sponsor for future issues and maybe also to support the ABBA project administration which has always been run on a financial shoestring. All suggestions in this respect from readers would be valued. I have been touched by several individuals offering support in addition to their subscriptions but I really must find a permanent solution.

I am planning a new ABBA website which I hope can be launched sometime in 2013. When there is news an announcement will be made on OSME's MEBirdnet. In the meantime it is still possible to access the old website (<http://dSPACE.dial.pipex.com/arabian.birds/>). Unfortunately I have not been able to amend or cancel it for ten years! If anyone visits it beware it shows the wrong email address and of course it is much out of date.

By the way if any reader is thinking of driving to central Asia themselves one day they might find our trip blog to be helpful, www.mikeandcarolgoeast.blogspot.com.

Lots of goodies in this issue, including news of two new species for Arabia and several other firsts - read on.

Good birding and atlasing in 2013.

Michael Penning

Please note, times are hard with ABBA/*Phoenix* finances, to help keep it alive and to ensure you get the next copy please take out a subscription if you can - see details on page 22.

Three corrections to *Phoenix* 28

First: In the paper by Brian Meadows on the status of shelducks in Eastern Province (pages 16-17) the reference to Bundy *et al.* twice in page 16, col 1, should have been '1989'.

Second: In the same paper Table 2 omitted data for the months January to April. The full Table 2 is now attached.

Table 2. Maximum counts of Common Shelduck at Sabkhat al-Fasl, September- April, 2001-4.

Month	2001/2	2002/3	2003/4
October	177		
November	250	88	14
December	850	400	555
January	800	2535	730
February	850	2600	800
March	690	2000	800
April	500	47	3

Third: On page 23 (*Bird observations at three protected areas in north-west Saudi Arabia: May 2011*) the last line of the first paragraph should be amended. The existing text "...1 June, two (a pair?) were seen." should be changed to read "...1 June, two (a pair?) of Black-winged Kites *Elanus caeruleus* were seen." Then run on the following paragraph which starts "This species was...", as part of the same paragraph.

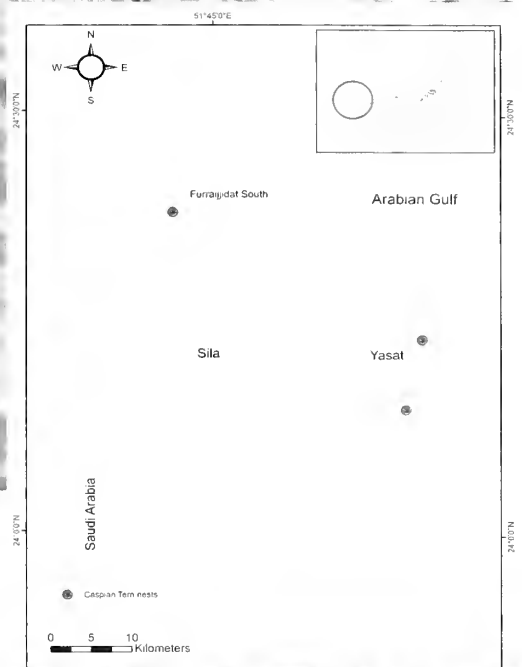
Sabkhat Al Fasl Eastern Province, Saudi Arabia

The local site of Phil Roberts in Dhahran for the last six years has been Sabkhat al Fasl (PA31/PB31). This is a scheduled Important Bird Area, located on the south west corner of Jubail Industrial City in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. The site consists of a large area of subkha, split by sand dams, that is fed by treated wastewater to create large shallow lagoons, it is a magnet for birds and is unquestionably the top bird watching site in the Eastern Province. Over 200 species have been recorded at the site, including White Breasted Waterhen *Amaurornis phoenicurus* the first record for Saudi Arabia. Some of Phil's photographs from SAF illustrating the wide variety of species that are present at various times of the year are scattered through this issue. The site has no real protection and faces the combined threats of uncontrolled hunting and fishing, as well as the rubbish left by these people.

Eurasian Stone Curlew breeding in Abu Dhabi, UAE

By S. Ahmed, S. B. Khan, J. N. Shah, A. A. Al Hammadi, E. A. Al Hammadi & S. Javed.

While undertaking routine bird monitoring on 4 July 2010 on Abu Al Abyad island (TB25), an adult Eurasian Stone Curlew *Burhinus oedienemus* was seen sitting under a tree in a wooded plantation about 100 m. from the shoreline. On approach the sitting adult moved to reveal that it had been incubating an egg. We observed the activity of the adult for a few minutes during which time it remained within a few metres of the nest and resumed incubation soon after we moved away. A second adult bird was also present approximately 10 m. from the nest, photos page 3.)



Clockwise from top left

The Turkestan Shrike *Lanius (isabellinus) phoenicuroides* is a common passage migrant and winter visitor at Sabkhat al Fasl, Eastern Province. This beautiful male was photographed during the spring migration. Photo: Phil Roherts.

A Caspian Tern *Sterna caspia* chick thought to be about ten days old in a nest scrape Furraiijidat South island, 24 December 2011. Location of breeding islands in UAE (2011). Page 4. Photo: Shahid B. Khan.



Eurasian Stone Curlew *Burhinus oedicnemus* in a wooded plantation on Abu al Abyad island, Abu Dhabi. First breeding in UAE, the single egg in the nest depression and an adult near its nest. Page 2. Photos: Shakeel Ahmed.

The first confirmed record for Arabia of Long-tailed Duck *Clangula hyemalis* was at Jahra Pool Reserve (NB35) Kuwait, 7 November 2012. Ouda Aber Albathaly found four birds, which were thought to be all females and/or juveniles. Photo: Khaled Al Ghanem.



The Eurasian Stone Curlew has a range which extends from North Africa and Iberia, east through southern Europe to Central Asia, to India to SE Asia (Cramp & Simmons, 1983). It is one of the less studied Palearctic species and is considered vulnerable at the continental level due to a rapid population decline (Tucker & Heath, 1994). The subspecies that breeds in North Africa and the Middle East is *saharae* and the bird photographed appears to show the characteristics of this race. The species has been confirmed to breed only twice previously in central Saudi Arabia but this appears to be the first breeding occurrence in the United Arab Emirates. This is thought to be a natural breeding occurrence but there is an on-going captive breeding programme for the species in Abu Dhabi Emirate and the likelihood of escapes breeding cannot be ruled out completely.

The Eurasian Stone Curlew is primarily a widespread winter visitor and passage migrant in the UAE in small numbers. Since 2007, it has been recorded at five coastal sites in Abu Dhabi by the Environment Agency - Abu Dhabi. The island of Abu Al Abyad island has seen the highest winter concentration (September - November) with groups of ten or more recorded regularly, with 20 adult individuals sighted on 22 September 2008.

References: ● Cramp, S. & K. E. L. Simmons. 1983. *Handbook of the Birds of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa: The Birds of the Western Palearctic*. Vol. 3. Oxford University Press, Oxford. ● Tucker G. M. & M. F. Heath. 1994. *Birds in Europe: their conservation status*. Birdlife International Series, 3. Birdlife International, Cambridge, UK.

Shakeel Ahmed, Shahid Bashir Khan, Junid Nazir Shah, Abdullah Ali Al Hammadi, Eissa Ali Al Hammadi & Sàlim Javed Terrestrial and Marine Biodiversity Management Sector, Environment Agency - Abu Dhabi, PO Box 45553, Abu Dhabi, UAE. (sjaved@ead.ae).

Wadi Ushar and Jebal Uthrub: an Important Bird Area in the south west highlands, Saudi Arabia

Wadi Ushar is in places a perennially flowing stream within the Jebal Uthrub (HB16) to the south and south east of Baljurashi. The site is situated on the boundaries of the Al-Bahah, 'Asir and Makkah emirates, with an altitude range of 590 - 2,447+ m. The area is managed by the Ministry of Agriculture.

The wadi which flows from the highlands to the Tihama is fed from the surrounding hills and includes a dam created to restore and manage water resources. The lowlands are subject to the hot and relatively humid climate typical of the lower reaches of the southern Tihama, while the highlands are cool and moist, receiving orographic and monsoonal rains. Jebal Uthrub is comprised of a group of rugged peaks of red granite escarpment crests within the Sarawat mountain chain. The highland region supports dense and important juniper woodlands and is characterized by well-managed traditional himas (age-old reserves managed by the local people for grazing, firewood and other products). To the west and south west a road descends the escarpment to the Tihama.

The total area of the site is just over 300 sq. km., which naturally divides into a core Natural Reserve and a Resource Use Reserve,

and has been proposed as a reserve by the Saudi Wildlife Authority for the conservation of the threatened, diverse flora of the region. This includes an especially rich juniper and *Acacia-Olea* woodlands in the highlands and *Acacia-Commiphora* woodlands in the lowlands. It also represents a wide spectrum of regional biotopes including a range of highlands habitats, escarpments, slopes, mid altitude habitats and the Tihama lowlands. In this general region all but one of the Arabian endemic birds have been recorded as well as most of the near-endemic species and these are likely to be found in the proposed reserve area. In addition the area holds a number of important mammals, reptiles and amphibians. A particular asset of the site is its educational value for ecology and geomorphology as well as presenting good examples of important traditional conservation practices, such as hima reserves, in an attractive region that is likely to be popular with ecotourists, particularly birdwatchers.

A full inventory of the birds of the region is being compiled and it is hoped that a future issue of *Phoenix* will give details. The larger mammals are particularly interesting, for example the region is part of the former range of the Arabian Leopard *Panthera pardus* and there have been unconfirmed reports that it still inhabits the area (which is currently being monitored by fixed camera traps). There is also suitable habitat for Hamadryas Baboon *Papio hamadryas*, Striped Hyaena *Hyaena hyaena*, Ratel *Mellivora capensis*, Genet *Genetta felina*, Rock Hyrax *Procavia capensis*, Indian Poreupine *Hystrix indica*, Caracal *Caracal caracal*, Wolf *Canis lupus*, Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*, and Cape Hare *Lepus capensis* all of which are considered likely to occur. Parts of the site might be suitable for the reintroduction of Nubian Ibex *Capra ibex* and Idmi Gazelle *Gazella gazella*.

The main threats to the site which are currently identified are human settlements and particularly the expansion of such settlements, agricultural expansion and road construction. Moderate threats are posed by overgrazing, forest fires, afforestation, tree cutting, hunting, uncontrolled rubbish dumps and unregulated tourism and recreation, which includes littering. The spread of invasive species plants such as the Mexican Poppy *Argemone mexicana* and Prickly Pear *Opuntia ficus-indica* are also an issue in the region.

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Recent breeding records of Caspian tern in Abu Dhabi Emirate, UAE

By Junid N. Shah, Shahid B. Khan, Shakeel Ahmed and Sàlim Javed

Six species of terns breed in the United Arab Emirates including Caspian Tern *Sterna caspia*. It is a resident breeding species and is known to breed as single pairs and in small colonies (Jennings, 2010). There is little information available about breeding in the UAE. Aspinall (2010) reports more than one breeding pair but more recently breeding has been reported from Umm Al Kurkum and Sir Bani Yas (SB25) islands (Wilson, 2012). The paucity of information is at least partly due to breeding occurring on near shore and offshore islands that are difficult to reach. At many

places, even if pairs are seen with signs of breeding behaviour, nests are difficult to locate.

On 24 December 2011, while surveying western islands in Abu Dhabi Emirate, as part of regular bird monitoring, breeding pairs were recorded at three islands, Yasat Judairah (SA25), Yasat north (SA25) and Furraijjiddat south (RB 25), see map page 3. At Yasat Judairah and Yasat north, nests had a single egg while at Furraijjiddat south, a chick about ten days old was photographed in a nest depression. See photo page 3.

In the same month, Caspian Terns were recorded at Faziya (RB25), Muhammaliyah (RB25), Abu Al Abyad (TB25) and Shweihat (SB25) islands. On Bul Syayeef island (UA 25) there were 54 birds in November, 33 birds in December 2011 and 62 birds in January 2012. Bul Syayeef as well as islands near Sila (RB25) should be monitored for breeding Caspian Terns.

References: ● Aspinall, S. 2010. *The breeding birds of the United Arab Emirates*. Second edition, Environment Agency - Abu Dhabi, UAE. ● Jennings, M. C. 2010. Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia. *Fauna of Arabia* 25. ● Wilson, K. D. P. 2012. Caspian Terns breed at Sir Bani Yas and Umm Al Kurkum islands. *Phoenix* 28:15-16.

Junid N. Shah, Shahid B. Khan, Shakeel Ahmed and Sâlim Javed, Terrestrial and Marine Biodiversity Management Sector, Environment Agency - Abu Dhabi, PO Box 45553, Abu Dhabi, UAE. (sjaved@ead.ae).

Swifts breeding at the Makkah Holy Sites

We saw a film on YouTube showing swifts calling and swooping over worshippers at the Great Mosque in Makkah and were interested to know which species of swifts it might be (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UGnQT9qZlM&feature=related>).

Jennings (2010) listed the breeding swifts species that may occur in the vicinity of Makkah today as the African Palm Swift *Cypsiurus parvus*, the Alpine Swift *Tachymarpis melba*, the Pallid Swift *Apus pallidus* and the Little Swift *Apus affinis*. Only the last one is known as a breeding bird in Makkah.

From our earlier research we know that the Egyptian scholar Al-Damiri (1341?-1405) who made the pilgrimage to Makkah, mentions in his book (Al-Damiri, 1405) "The Life of Animals", that swifts nest in the roof of the mosque in Maqam Ibrahim (Station of Abraham) and the entrance to the Great Mosque known as the Gate of Bani Shaybah. Al-Damiri mentions two bird names, which correspond to swift and swallow. He appears to make no sharp distinction between them and practically treats them as a single species that breeds in the vicinity of the Kaaba. We feel sure that this species is the Little Swift, which makes Al-Damiri's report the oldest precise nesting record of the species anywhere. It is especially pleasing that it is still nesting in the holy places in Makkah today, 600 years later.

We would be very pleased to receive more information about swifts breeding in Makkah today or indeed anywhere else in the Arabian Peninsula.

Links: For details of all swifts, swallows and martins worldwide: (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Swallows-Martins-Swifts-Worldwide/>).

References: ● Al-Damiri, Muhammad ibn Musa. 1405. *Hayat al-Hayawan al-Kubra* (Edition Dar al-Tiba'a al-'Amira 1867, p. 367. Cit. after <http://books.google.com/>). ● Jennings, M.C. 2010. Atlas of the breeding birds of Arabia. *Fauna of Arabia* 25 (p. 433-442).

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Editors note: The al-Damiri (1405) record is now the oldest record on the ABBA database, a position previously held by Carsten Niebuhr's record of Green Bee-eaters *Merops orientalis* near Sana'a in 1763.

Breeding records of Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse at Mirfa, Abu Dhabi, UAE

Three species of Sandgrouse have been recorded breeding in the United Arab Emirates, Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse *Pterocles lichtensteini*, Spotted Sandgrouse *P. senegallus* and Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse *P. exustus* (Aspinall, 1996, 2005, Javed, 1998). While the UAE distribution of these sandgrouse species has been studied and documented, little is known about the ecology, including the breeding biology of the Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse in the Emirates. Aspinall (1996) estimated the breeding population of the species in 1996 was between at least 100 pairs to possibly more than 1,000 pairs; in 2010 he revised his estimate to less than 500 pairs (Aspinall 2010).

During the regular bird monitoring carried out in Abu Dhabi Emirate, families of this sandgrouse were seen at Mirfa (TA25) in 2011 and 2012. Mirfa is a coastal site about 150 km. to the west of Abu Dhabi city (UA25). On 28 June 2011 a family was observed comprised of three chicks, approximately 2-3 weeks old, with an adult bird, possibly a female. On 11 June the following year two family groups were seen, one consisting of two adults and two chicks and another group with two adults and three chicks. All these sightings were near the Al Mughirah Palace, Mirfa.

Mirfa represents a new confirmed breeding location for this species and indicates a continuing spread of the species westward in the UAE (since Jennings, 2010). In this part of the UAE Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse inhabit bare semi-desert, often with scattered thorny bushes and trees. Although there have been large-scale changes in the coastal habitats due to development, areas such as Mughirah Palace are free from disturbance and provide a safe refuge for the species to breed.

References: ● Aspinall, S. 1996. *Status of the breeding birds of the United Arab Emirates*. Hobby Publication, UK. ● Aspinall, S. 2005. *Birds in* Hellyer, P. & S. Aspinall (eds), *The Emirates - A Natural History*, Trident Press ● Aspinall, S. 2010. *The breeding birds of the United Arab Emirates*, Second edition. Environment Agency - Abu Dhabi, UAE. ● Javed, S. 2008. *Birds of United Arab Emirates with special reference to Abu Dhabi Emirate* in R. J. Perry (ed). *Terrestrial Environment of Abu Dhabi Emirate*. Environment Agency - Abu Dhabi, UAE. ● Jennings, M. C. 2010. Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia. *Fauna of Arabia* 25.

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Northern Bald Ibis Workshop

A new International Working Group for the Northern Bald Ibis *Geronticus eremita* has been set up under the umbrella of the African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement and coordinated by BirdLife International. The IWG had its inaugural meeting in Jizan, Saudi Arabia, 19-22 November 2012, generously hosted by the Saudi Wildlife Authority and Jizan University. The 23 delegates at the meeting represented the range countries and former range countries. The programme included a field visit to areas where the last few wild Northern Bald Ibis eastern population, which breed in Syria, have been known to stop-off, often for several weeks, on their migration south. The meeting initiated a revision of the international species action plan and successfully established the new working group. Key participants and hosts were Omar Al Khushaim, the country representative, and Mohamed Shobrak (Taif University) who was nominated to chair the group for the first three years on behalf of Saudi Arabia.

More information can be obtained at the following site: (http://www.unep-aewa.org/news/news_elements/2012/nbi_meeting_saudi_arabia.htm).

Contributed by Chris Bowden, Coordinator of the AEWA Northern Bald Ibis IWG, c/o International Species Recovery, RSPB, The Lodge, Sandy, Beds UK SG19 2DL. (Chris.Bowden@rspb.org.uk).

Out of Africa? Some notes on Arabian Vultures

By P. J. Mundy

The subspecies of Bearded Vulture *Gypaetus barbatus* in Arabia

Recently Jennings (2010:244) mapped the Bearded Vulture as occurring along the mountains of the western side of the Arabian peninsula from near the Jordan border in the north to Aden in the south. The map shows four 'clusters' of records, each separated by little more than 300 km. from the next. Curiously, he considers that while the Afrotropical subspecies *G. b. meridionalis* occurs in "western Arabia", i.e. south-west Arabia, the Palearctic subspecies *G. b. barbatus* "may well be" the subspecies in the north-west, like those of Sinai. This is curious, because these four clusters are potentially in contact, along the mountains adjacent to the peninsula's west coast, and are therefore likely to be the same subspecies. Just as curious is that south-west Arabia is in many ways an extremity of the Afrotropical zoogeographical region (Jennings, 2010: 80-82). Because the south-west corner of the peninsula is only 30 km. across from Africa (Djibouti) at the Bab-al-Mandab strait, then equally one could expect representatives of the Bearded Vulture in that corner to be Afrotropical rather than Palearctic.

The two subspecies of Bearded Vulture were first properly delimited, in my view, by Hiraldo *et al.* (1984). They have distinctive differences, such that even the drawing by Jan Wilczur in Jennings (2010: 243) can be unequivocally determined as the Afrotropical *meridionalis*. In brief, the differences are as follows:-

barbatus: black ear tuft, numerous black filoplumes on the 'chin' ('whiskers'), black eyebrows meet on the crown, usually a well-developed black pectoral band, and feathered tarsi.

meridionalis: no tuft, no 'whiskers' on 'chin', eyebrows fail to meet on the crown, no pectoral band, and partly bare tarsi.

In their analysis of museum specimens, Delibes *et al.* (1984) stated that Yemeni birds were of the Eurasian subspecies *barbatus*; they noted that Bates (1939) had already mentioned this. In fact, Bates was of the opposite opinion! He wrote "...the Lämmergeier found in Yaman is ... *meridionalis* ..." (Bates, 1939). Mike Jennings (pers. comm.) says that he followed Dickinson (2003) for most of the taxonomy in his atlas which, for this species, was supported by the latter opinion of Bates. Indeed Bates went further, in remarking that the "black streak behind the ear" is of doubtful importance. It is however this very character that Hiraldo *et al.* (1984) found the most useful in distinguishing the subspecies. The present-day occurrence of Bearded Vultures in south-west Arabia (now limited to Yemen) and those in Ethiopia are separated by 400 km. of the rift valley (including the Red Sea). To my knowledge Bearded Vultures have never been seen crossing water, and certainly at sea level the altitude is far too low for this montane bird. So it seems unlikely that Ethiopian *meridionalis* could have reached south-west Arabia directly.

The Natural History Museum at Tring has many Bearded Vultures in its collection (Delibes *et al.*, 1984, used 73). I examined four Arabian specimens, two adults and two immatures, in October 2012; these are the same four that Bates (1939) measured, I expect. All were collected by G. W. Bury in 1913 from "Sok al Khamis" (JA07) in Yemen (numbers 1914. 1. 28. 116-119). There are no specimens available from the now extinct north west Arabian population. All four specimens examined are *barbatus* with the black ear tuft and whiskered face; the two immatures do not have a pectoral band, but can still be recognised as *barbatus*. Furthermore, P.A. Clancey (pers. comm. to MCJ) thought that the Bearded Vultures he saw in Yemen in 1948 were *aureus* (now a synonym for *barbatus*).

So far, then, the indisputable evidence (i.e. specimens) indicates that the Bearded Vultures in Yemen are the Palearctic *barbatus* and not the Afrotropical subspecies. In an effort to confirm or refute this statement, it would be much appreciated if photographs, particularly of the bird's head, taken in Arabia (with locality and date) could be sent to me.

Rüppell's Griffon *Gyps rueppellii* in Arabia

Similarly, would observers please send photographs taken in Arabia of any bird that is thought to be a Rüppell's Griffon. (Note my amendments of the name from Jennings, 2010: 247). This Afrotropical griffon (see Mundy, 2002, for a definition of a griffon) is very distinctive from the Eurasian Griffon *G. fulvus*, in its 'dappled' black and cream-coloured plumage as an adult. Jennings (2010: 248) states that whilst there have been unsubstantiated sight records from Arabia during the ABBA period (1985-2010) there is a single specimen record. This was one of two birds shot (only one was skinned) near Taif on 26 May 1934 by Philby. It is in the Natural History Museum at Tring and is said to be "not properly labelled" (Jennings, 2010: 247), therefore throwing its provenance into doubt. I also examined this

specimen. There appears to be no original label and no accession number, although it does have a label on which is written - "Almost certainly the vulture Philby says he got at Taif, 26.v.1934". This may have been put on by Bates who was working on Philby's Arabian specimens in the 1930s. It is a sub-adult, with many pointed contours (a juvenile feature), and what I call a 'powder-puff' ruff of small disintegrated feathers but with a hint of feathering in it. Its rather dark plumage militates against calling it *erlangeri* Salvadori 1908 (as on the label); this subspecies was said to be paler/whiter than the nominate, though I cannot see *erlangeri* as distinctive enough for a subspecies (Mundy *et al.*, 1992: 100, 102). The specimen's wing length of 670 mm is the average for the species.

At first I dismissed the possibility of *rueppellii* being in Arabia presumably from Ethiopia and/or Eritrea, and Djibouti, on the basis that I thought it would not fly across water. But in recent years *rueppellii* have been seen in Spain (Gutiérrez, 2003), presumably having crossed the strait of Gibraltar, albeit half the width of the Bab-al-Mandab. So perhaps we can expect this griffon to cross over to Yemen on occasions, as was probably the case with Philby's specimen. It is of course well known that small numbers of the Eurasian Griffon do cross the Bab-al-Mandab in autumn from Arabia to Africa (Jennings, 2010: 248) and presumably vice-versa in spring.

Lappet-faced Vulture *Torgos tracheliotos*

I have previously given descriptions of the Lappet-faced Vulture and considered there to be only two subspecies (Mundy *et al.*, 1992: 151-153). The nominate *tracheliotos* occupies Africa and *negevensis* occupies the Middle East, with mixing of the two in Egypt (and Sudan?). The species has never been seen to fly across water, and therefore Afrotropical *tracheliotos* is unlikely ever to enter Arabia. The drawing of a flying bird in Jennings (2010: 250) has the white 'trousers' (also called 'thighs', though actually the tibias) of *tracheliotos* though no white patagial line is shown. Recently, however, and fortunately, there is a marvellous photo of a nesting pair of adults by Ulli Wernery (Wernery 2009, photo on p. 13). These show the characters of *negevensis* - pale head with hardly a lappet, wholly dark bill, mostly brown 'trousers', and a brown patagium. Jennings has said (2010: 250) that Arabian birds "mainly show the characters of *T. t. negevensis* but not consistently." Again, photographs would aid the identifications.

Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*

The Egyptian Vulture by contrast can be a serious wanderer across water, and it is to be expected that Arabia hosts the nominate subspecies *percnopterus* from both Eurasia and Africa. Indeed a photo of a group in Muscat, Oman, in November (Jennings, 2010: 76) is of the nominate form with a black bill. While Muscat is in the area of Arabia where Indo-Malayan, also called the Oriental zoogeographical region, species are found, this vulture is not one of them. The subspecies *ginginianus* with a yellow bill occurs in the Indian subcontinent, east of about 70°E. This is a distance of approximately 1,000 km. from Oman, so it is very unlikely ever to occur in Arabia.

Acknowledgements: I thank Robert Prŷs-Jones for permission to examine vulture specimens at Tring, and Mike Jennings for extra information and also comments on a previous version of this note.

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Greater Flamingo breed again at Al Wathba, UAE

Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus* bred successfully for the third time in Al Wathba Wetland Reserve (UB25) in June 2012. The first successful breeding at the site occurred in 1998/9, which resulted in the area being declared as a protected site. The second successful breeding occurred in June 2011 when 18 chicks hatched and fledged.

During 2012 three breeding colonies were established in April and May but egg-laying and hatching occurred only at one of them, this was the breeding site where the colony was successful in breeding in 2011. The colony was established on a man-made island created in 2004 in one of the lakes of Al Wathba. It was specifically built to facilitate the breeding of Greater Flamingo by providing an area safe from disturbance and predators.

Birds started congregating at the island in the first week of April and initially the remains of previous year's nesting mounds were refurbished and used. Also many new mounds were made. The total number of mounds reached 151 and in the last week of June around 139 birds were recorded sitting on nests. The first chick hatched on 22 June and six chicks were seen the next day. By 15 July a total of 17 chicks had hatched. The colony was abandoned on 22 July while many nests still had eggs. The breeding period was very similar to that of 2011, when the first chick was seen on 25 June and the last chick had hatched by 18 July.

The other two colonies were established in the month of May, in the first colony of 23 mounds and the second of 54 mounds. No eggs were seen at these colonies though some birds were observed sitting on the nests.

Management of water levels, proactive predator control and use of the man-made island have been responsible for breeding in successive years of Greater Flamingo at Al Wathba.

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Journals, Reports and Other Publications

The following notes list some of the papers concerning birds and other wildlife which have appeared in journals and newsletters relevant to the Arabian environment in recent months. Space does not permit the full citation of each article but further information can be obtained from the various societies and organisations shown. A full listing of all titles relevant to Arabian birds is published regularly by ABBA, the last was in 2011 and this will be updated during 2013. An announcement will be made on the OSME MEBirdnet.

Sandgrouse, the Journal of the Ornithological Society of the Middle East, the Caucasus and central Asia.

The two issues of Volume 34 in 2012 included major papers on the Egyptian Vulture on Socotra island, Yemen, covering population, ecology, conservation and folklore. Another paper presented the results of a study on a loose colony of breeding Turtle Doves on Bahrain island. Interestingly no firm evidence of double brooding was obtained. Injury feigning by incubating birds was noted on a number of occasions, a behaviour known for the species elsewhere but not recorded in Arabia before. Short notes concerned Great Spotted Eagle over-summering in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia and the roosting behaviour of Hume's Warbler wintering in Oman.

Sandgrouse (ISSN 0260-4736) is available on subscription to OSME. Details from the Secretary (secretary@osme.org).

Zoology in the Middle East (ISSN 0939-7140)

Volume 55 (2012): 140 pages (15 main papers and six short communications). Ornithological interest in this volume is limited to the habitat requirements of the Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius* in Iran and the diet of the Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni* in Israel and Palestine. The single mammal paper concerns twenty years of monitoring a re-introduced population of Mountain Gazelles, *Gazella gazella* in the Saudi Arabia. Other main papers concern reptiles (1), fish (1) crustaceans (1), insects (4) and arachnids (5). **Volume 56 (2012):** 152 pages (14 main papers and eight short communications). Of the two papers on birds one concerns the nesting, distribution and conservation of the Crab Plover, *Dromas ardeola*, in the United Arab Emirates the other estimating the population density of Asian Houbara Bustard, *Chlamydotis macqueenii*, in central Iran. The other main papers cover reptiles (4), fish (1) insects (4) and arachnids (2). **Volume 57 (2012):** 148 pages (17 main papers, four short communications). This issue contains five papers and one short note on birds. From Iran there is a paper on nest site selection by the Asian Houbara Bustard, *Chlamydotis macqueenii* and a short note on the nestling diet of the Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*; from Turkey there are contributions on the breeding success of White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* and offspring sex ratios and breeding success of the Great Tit *Parus major*. From Jordan there is a paper on territory size variations in wintering Finsch's Wheatears, *Oenanthe finschii*. Arabian ornithological interest is a detailed account of the electrocution and collision of birds with power lines in Saudi Arabia. Mohammed Shobrak expands the initial

report in *Phoenix* 25 to cover the results of his four years of research of the subject. Corn Crane *Crex crex* and Quail *Coturnix coturnix* were found each year in some numbers, with worrying conservation implications. The single mammal paper is about finding proof of the continued existence of Arabian Gazelles, *Gazella arabica*, in the Asir Mountains, Saudi Arabia through camera trapping. The volume also includes papers on reptiles (3), fish (1), molluscs (1) and insects (5). Three other short papers include the first record of Blanford's Fox, *Vulpes cana* in Yemen. **Volume 58 (2012):** 88 pages. A single paper issue on the Chloropidae (grass flies) of the Arabian Peninsula (Diptera: Cyclorrhapha). A total of 119 species of 48 genera are recorded and of these 21 are described as new to science. **Zoology in the Middle East – Supplement 4 (2012):** This supplement, which has not been seen, is comprised of 22 papers on earthworm biology.

The ZME and its supplements are available from Kasperek Verlag Mönchhofstr. 16, 69120 Heidelberg, Germany; (Kasperek@t-online.de; www.kasperek-verlag.de). Subscriptions to ZME secure three issues a year.

Bulletin of the British Ornithologists Club

Volume: 132 (2012) includes a full account of the strange swifts collected on the coast of southern Arabia and Socotra and sight records of the mysterious 'Dhofar Swift'. They are all Forbes-Watson's Swift *Apus berliozi*. We learn that the nominate subspecies is confined to Socotra whilst birds of the mainland are probably the race *bensoni*.

New Books

Phoenix aims to provide details of all new publications which are relevant to birds and wildlife in Arabia or generally to the Arabian/Middle East environment. Titles mentioned are usually available in good book shops in Arabia, Europe and North America. Others are on restricted distribution or privately published and readers wishing to obtain copies should contact the author, publisher or distributor mentioned. When ordering through a library or agent quote the ISBN or ISSN number if given. The prices shown against titles are published prices but may not include post and packaging. Recommendations made about books are based on the standard of treatment of the subject, format and quality of contents. A recommendation does not necessarily mean good value for money. Readers are asked to provide details of other new and relevant titles not already mentioned in this survey.

Underground in Arabia by J. Pint (2012)

Caving in Arabia is not a subject that even those closely connected with the environment know much about, this book provides a great deal of education in this respect. Caving is not without its ornithological interest, don't forget it was a caver who discovered the Yemen Serin colony in Oman's Tawi Attair sink hole in Dhofar. Some general aspects and records of birds in caves are mentioned in *Phoenix* 24:14-15. This book provides a great deal of other interesting geological, archeological and biological interest. Caves in Arabia (this book is mainly about

Saudi Arabia) fall into two main categories, limestone karst caves in sedimentary Arabia and volcanic lava tubes of the western igneous. What a fascinating world cavers inhabit, tiny holes in the desert floor hardly big enough to squeeze through open up into vast caverns filled with bats, bones and surprises. Some of these holes are so large that they have a daily cycle of air rushing in and out as the outside temperatures changes, inside they may be decorated with gorgeous stalactites and stalagmites, flowstones and gypsum flowers. Some holes have a 100 m. sheer drop at the entrance, others extend hundreds of metres underground and there are deep underwater caves. Since the 1980s the author has made numerous discoveries about Saudi Arabian caves including some unique formations of evaporated deposits. Another discovery is 'guanomites' which are towers of ancient pigeon droppings falling on the same place for probably thousands of years. There are tales of scuba diving in underground aquifers (scary stuff), mummified foxes and live wolves and hyaenas, huge bone heaps and prehistoric human skulls and artifacts. The lava tubes are formed when a lava flow solidifies on the sides but remains molten in the flow, gradually even the roof solidifies and the molten flow is then a long pipe underground (flows like this can be seen in Hawaii today). When the flow suddenly stops the molten lava falls out of the end leaving an empty tube ripe for colonisation by mammals, snakes, swifts and owls. Some of these tubes in Arabia have been measured at 40 m. across, over a kilometre long and many thousands of years old. This book is an all round fascinating read.

Paperback; 160 pages (130 X 200 mm); published by Selwa Press (www.SelwaPress.com), ISBN: 978-0-9701157-5-1.

Birds of Kuwait - a comprehensive visual guide by M. Pope & S. Zogaris (2012)

It should be said first of all that this book is magnificent, it is full colour throughout and packed end to end with good quality colour photos. Some might dismiss books like this as 'coffee table', as it has relatively little text but this would be unfair as on close inspection it clear that it is a valuable addition to any ornithological library. The book illustrates with photos all the species known to have occurred in Kuwait to June 2012 (that's about 390 species) and is therefore a comprehensive collection of photos of birds of the region. It features the work of no less than 43 photographers, including many native Kuwaitis, several of whom have had pictures in *Phoenix* over the years. Many pictures of rarities and vagrants tend to have been taken outside Kuwait which is perhaps understandable if a species has only occurred a couple of times, but several more are now on the Kuwait list because they were photographed in the state. The introductory pages (37) cover bird seasons and breeding in Kuwait, short notes on taxonomy and identification, notes on observing and photographing birds, conservation and important places for birds in Kuwait. The photos are arranged about three or four to a page (usually one page for each species), with one large format picture, typically the full width of the page and two or three smaller pictures along the bottom. The whole produces a startlingly beautiful book, a first class picture gallery. This is remarkable when it is realised that most contributors are amateur bird enthusiasts. Only one or two pictures show a little too much digital zoom but out of a total of 1400 or so photos you really

have to search for them. On the photos themselves there are short notes on the plumages etc of the birds depicted, the photographer's initials and the country if the picture was taken outside Kuwait. In between the photos on a strip across the middle of the page are a characteristic silhouette, names in English and Arabic and the scientific name, the IUCN global conservation status (NT, VU, EN, CR where appropriate) and the maximum dimensions of overall length and wingspan. The short accompanying text mentions frequency of occurrence in Kuwait, including highest counts, habitat and location notes, some identification and conservation issues. Appendices include a glossary of terms, indexes in the three languages, a birding code of conduct, a key to, and short biographies of, all the photographers contributing plus a references list. This is a beautiful book of reference photos of Middle East birds and is recommended.

Hard cover; 413 pages (240 X 310 mm). This book is sponsored by the Kuwait Foreign Petroleum Exploration Company (KUFPEC) and published by Biodiversity East, Nicosia, Cyprus (www.bio-e.org), ISBN: 978-9963-2811-0-7. There is not retail version available yet but this is under consideration along with an e-book, an Arabic version and i-phone/pad application. There should also be a .pdf available for download from the KUFPEC website.

Marine Atlas - Western Arabian Gulf by R. A. Loughland and K. A. Al-Abdulkader (2011)

In 1977 Saudi Aramco published *Biotopes of the Western Arabian Gulf* which was the first book specifically on the marine environment of the region and which has been a very respected source ever since. Their new title is likely to become a similar stalwart reference for many years. Like the recent Kuwait bird book (above) this atlas is in the 'magnificent' class; large format with huge colour photos from end to end. The book's scope covers a wide spectrum of subjects all with an emphasis on maps, locations, distribution and range as befits an atlas. There are nine main subject chapters after introductions and overviews, these are: human uses of coastal and marine resources (includes a good archeology section), mangroves and salt marshes, subtidal habitats, fisheries, island ecosystems, marine mammals, marine and coastal birds, marine and coastal reptiles and conservation of coastal and marine resources. Birds feature prominently, including many photos and text in almost all the chapters but especially those relating to mangrove habitats, the islands, and conservation chapters. The bird chapter of 41 pages is possibly the most disappointing in that it is a missed opportunity for expounding the importance of the area for many breeding species and wintering and migrating birds. Instead it is mainly limited to a checklist of species using the marine biotopes of the region (and thus very few passerines are mentioned). The rather limited text also includes a brief description which is just not needed in a book like this. However the chapter has very many large and beautiful photos of birds in their natural habitats which provides a good overview of marine habitats in the region. The value of this book is twofold. Firstly, it presents a wonderful array of photos covering all aspects of the marine environment in the western Arabian Gulf and secondly it presents a set of very clear maps (including aerial photo maps) showing the distribution of fauna and flora, various habitats, intertidal and sub tidal features, islands, and topographical/marine issues. Recommended as a

general source on marine environments in the region.

No details of price. Hardback 310 X 380 mm, 384 pages. Includes a DVD in back cover. Published by the Saudi Aramco Environmental Protection Dept. ISBN 978-0-9776600-8-7

Announcements and Requests for information

Records of Eastern Province Vagrants

Brian Meadows and Jem Babbington are currently preparing a joint paper on rare birds in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, covering the period 1989-2012 inclusive. This paper will be an update to *Birds of the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia* by Bundy, G., Connor, R. J. and C. J. O. Harrison, published by H. F. and G. Witherby in association with Aramco in 1989. They would be grateful for any unpublished records of species listed as vagrants by Bundy *et al.* within the political boundary of the Eastern Province. Records should be sent to Brian Meadows, 9 Old Hall Lane, Walton-on-the-Naze, Essex, C014 8LE, UK or BriauSMeadows@lycos.com.

The Bird Calendar Oman - 2013

Hanne and Jens Eriksen have produced their 2013 Oman Bird calendar. Details are available from them at www.BirdsOman.com. Price per copy: OMR 5, AED 50, GBP 10, USD 16, EUR 12 (all including air mail postage). Contact: hjoman@gmail.com.

Migration routes and breeding origin of wintering Crab Plovers at Barr al Hikman, Oman

The extensive intertidal flats of Barr al Hikman (YB18), lying on the east central coast of the Sultanate of Oman, are home at various times of the year to more than 300,000 shorebirds (Delany *et al.* 2009). During the winter of 2008 a joint team of Dutch, Swedish, Scottish and Omani ornithologists started to study these shorebirds. These studies are continuing and now focus on the ecology of one conspicuous and important species, the Crab Plover *Dromas ardeola*. About 7,000 Crab Plovers winter in the Barr al Hikman area each year. In summer most of them leave the area although a few, about 50 pairs, breed on Masirah island (YB18) nearby (Jens Eriksen, pers. comm.). In 2010 a Crab Plover ringed in 2008 in Barr al Hikman was caught on its nest on Dara island (30°06'N 49°07'E) in south west Iran, at the head of the Arabian Gulf. In the same year, 3,527 nests of the species were counted on this island (Tayefeh *et al.*, 2011) and this raised the question as to whether Dara island might be the main source for the wintering Crab Plover population of Barr al Hikman.

Recently, we started a long-term program to understand the Barr al Hikman ecosystem. We consider Crab Plovers to be one of the keystone predators of the intertidal flats there and one of our goals is to study their local movements in detail. In order to do so, we make use of a novel type of satellite tracking device, developed by

the University of Amsterdam (UvA). See photo page 13. These loggers transmit data via a local wireless network. So far we have successfully studied the whereabouts of 12 tagged adults throughout the winter; all birds stayed within Barr al Hikman. In 2012 two birds fitted with loggers the previous year returned to the range of our wireless system with a working logger full of position data. It took several days to transmit all data, which revealed not only their breeding area but their migration routes were also logged in great detail, as follows.

Bird 446 This bird, probably a second year male when caught in March 2011, set off for a 1,600 km. journey on 7 May 2011. It flew straight across the desert and the mountains of Oman and after two days it reached Iran. In Iran it slowly made its way west until reaching the head of the Gulf on 30 May. It spent the summer at an island 17 km. north of the earlier mentioned Dara island. This island is not known to have a breeding population of Crab Plovers (pers. comm Di Marchi). Because the bird did not return to exactly the same place each day (as might be expected for breeding individuals) we concluded that it did not breed in 2012. On 22 October it set off for its journey back to Oman. This time it took the bird only two days to complete the 1,600 km. flight after following a mainly coastal route. See map page 13.

Bird 490 This male Crab Plover was caught as an adult bird in November 2011. It left Barr al Hikman on 7 April 2012 and flew probably the same route as bird 446, across the desert and over mountains at an altitude of about 700m. On 21 April it arrived at Dara island where it spent three months. Over these months, it returned to exactly the same place daily, hence it is likely it bred. The bird left Dara Island on 14 July, and subsequently visited Iraq, Kuwait and Saudi-Arabia, where it stayed until October, especially in the Ras Az Zawr area (PA31), north west of Jubail. Later that month it flew to Qatar and the UAE and by the end of October it set off to Barr al Hikman, reaching the area after flying more than 700 km. straight over the desert. See map page 13.

Postscript In late December 2012 news was received that a Crab Plover colour ringed on 23 November 2011 at Barr al Hikman had been observed on 28 November 2012 in the Gulf of Mannar, extreme south east India. That this bird was seen in winter >2,500 km. away from its ringing site, the previous wintering location, raises lots of interesting questions and certainly encourages our team to continue colour ringing studies of Crab Plovers.

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Crab Plovers re-colonise an old nesting site in Abu Dhabi, UAE

The Crab Plover *Dromas ardeola* is one of the most important breeding bird species in the United Arab Emirates. It breeds only on two islands in the emirate of Abu Dhabi. The species is unique among waders due to it nesting in burrows. To breed successfully it needs undisturbed areas where there is no possibility of burrows being trampled by man or animals.

Prior to 2004, only two breeding colonies were known in the UAE, Abu Al Abyad (TB25) and Umm Amim (TA25) islands which had one colony each. The bulk of nests were found on Abu Al Abyad at a colony of less than 500 active nests, this colony was on a small sandy island at the end of a dredged channel. In 2004 birds were also seen nesting at another nearby site. Over a period of time most of the breeding birds shifted to the new site as the old one was prone to flooding which damaged many nests. In 2010, the number of active nests on Abu al Abyad rose to more than 1,350 at the new colony while the old site was inactive for the first time since monitoring began in 2003. The old nesting site was inactive again in 2011 and it seemed the birds had abandoned it altogether as a nesting site.

However, during 2012, some of birds returned to the old site to nest. Out of the total 1,095 active nests on the island, 283 were recorded at the old site although nests were made some way from the area that is prone to flooding. Such re-colonisation of a former nest site underlines the importance of safeguarding all nesting sites for important species such as Crab Plover, even if they are not in use each year.

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Botulism affecting wintering gulls in UAE

Avian botulism was first confirmed and documented in Dubai and Sharjah cities (VA27), UAE as a regular phenomenon affecting aquatic birds, including gulls, herons and flamingos, by the Central Veterinary Research Laboratory (CVRL), Dubai (Wernery & Haydn-Evans, 1992). They reported that incidents of botulism affecting waterbirds occur at the beginning of the hot season each year.

Clostridium botulinum is a bacterium which can generate extremely potent neurotoxins in putrefying animal waste. The bacterium is widespread in the environment in wet or dry soil where it can survive in spore form for many years. Outbreaks of botulism can occur in waterbirds after they consume infected decomposing animal material. Ambient mean temperatures in excess of 23 °C are required for *C. botulinum* bacterial toxin production. The mean daily temperature in Dubai exceeds 23 °C from March until November. Symptoms of botulism in birds include: signs of fatigue with wings drooped away from the body, birds unable to stand upright and walk on their lower legs (tarsometarsi), difficulty in breathing and green-coloured faecal discharge. See photo page 13.

The Emirates Marine Environmental Group (EMEG) reported high gull mortalities in Dubai involving several thousand dead birds, including Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans*, Steppe Gull *L. fuscus barabensis* and Black-headed Gull *L. ridibundus*, occurring at the end of the winters of 2007-08 and 2008-09 (Wilson, 2012). The same source reported gull mortalities also for the winters of 2009-10 and 2010-11 but relatively small numbers were involved

in these years. Moribund gulls were collected by EMEG from gull roost sites at Palm Jebel Ali (VA27) and taken to the CVRL in March 2009 where mouse assays were conducted confirming the presence of *C. botulinum* toxin.

During the autumn several gull species migrate to the UAE to overwinter. These include Caspian Gull, Steppe Gull, Heuglin's Gull *L. heuglini*, Black-headed Gull and Pallas's Gull *L. ichthyæetus*. The first birds to arrive back to the UAE in late summer are Caspian Gulls which are observed as early as mid-August. Generally the last wintering gulls to arrive are Black-headed and Pallas's Gulls which usually appear in large numbers in December. These wintering gulls return to their breeding grounds mostly in late March to early April.

Wernery & Haydn-Evans (1992) from the CVRL reported finding hundreds of dead and sick waterbirds including gulls in Dubai and Sharjah mainly at the end of the Dubai Creek and at the former Ramtha Refuse Tip (now known as Al-Wasit Nature Reserve). The CVRL was founded in 1985 so, as this was an annual event, it can be assumed that botulism induced waterbird mortalities have regularly occurred in Dubai at least from the mid nineteen-eighties.

Botulinum outbreaks causing gull mortalities in Dubai and Sharjah appear to be a regular late winter phenomenon with peak mortality amongst wintering gulls occurring from late February onwards to late March, which is the period just before the birds migrate to return to their summer breeding grounds. Many outbreaks of botulism have previously been shown to be associated with decomposing organic matter at landfill sites e.g. Britain (Lloyd *et al.*, 1976), the Virgin Islands (Norton, 1986), and Israel and Palestine (Gophen *et al.*, 1991). It would seem that outbreaks in late winter are caused by ingesting decaying organic matter at local municipal refuse tips. Gulls are especially at risk during late February and March when the mean daily temperatures exceed 23 °C.

Rocke (2006) reports that avian botulism is the most significant disease of waterbirds and it has the potential to cause significant population declines in some species. Landfill sites are currently located at Al Qusais and Jebel Ali in Dubai emirate and Sajja in Sharjah emirate. Improved management of these landfills, where freshly deposited organic material is covered by inert material on a daily basis, would help to reduce outbreaks affecting tip-feeding gulls.

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First breeding record of Purple Heron in UAE

On 20 August 2012, while making one of my regular birding visits to Ain Al Fayda (VB25), a public park in the south of Al Ain (Abu Dhabi Emirate - United Arab Emirates), I flushed an adult Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea* from a small patch of reeds at the back of the park. This bird circled around at a low height at a distance of about 100 m, rather than just flying away as one might have expected. Approaching closer to the reeds where the bird took off, I spotted a second individual which I quickly identified as a juvenile, due to the lack of dark markings on the head, and some remains of down on the head and neck. As I attempted a slow approach to the juvenile to take pictures I realised that it was still unable to fly and it clumsily flapped its wings and jumped into the water to swim a few metres towards the next patch of reeds. This bird had clearly been bred at this site, making it the first breeding record of the species in UAE.

Purple Heron has rarely been recorded at Ain Al Fayda in the past few years, with only five records prior to 2012, these were one in November 1996, two records of the same individual in November 1998 and single birds in May 2006 and April 2008 (UAE Database, Emirates Birds Records Committee). In 2012, the first record of the species on the site was on the day that I discovered the juvenile, despite the site having been visited by birders on numerous occasions since January (pers. obs. and UAE Database, EBRC). Although there are no early spring records from Ain Al Fayda, up to six individuals have regularly been recorded all year round since 2008 at Zakher pool (VA25), an artificial lake located 7.5 km. to the west of Ain Al Fayda. In late 2012 two adults have been regularly observed, from September to at least November, in a reed bed 2 km. south of where the juvenile was found.

Purple Heron have an incubation period of 26 days, and nestlings start leaving the nest around the age of 16 days, well before fledging, which occurs at 2-3 months old (Moser 1986). In view of its nearly adult size, the juvenile at Ain Al Fayda was presumably close to fledging, so around two months old. In this case laying would have occurred towards the end of May, and hatching in the second half of June. Although clutch sizes in the species vary from 2-5 eggs, no other juveniles were observed at the site. A chick, presumably the same individual, was unfortunately found dead on 18 September in a dry ditch only 70m away from where it was first observed. The body was completely dry making it difficult to assess the date of death.

Ain Al Fayda is a 180 ha. private park managed by the One-To-One hotels company, developed around a natural hot spring at the bottom of Jebel Hafeet, the highest mountain of Abu Dhabi Emirate. The park is composed of a mosaic of tree plantations, bushes, lawns, kindergartens and water bodies surrounding the hotel facilities. Release of water in the western side of the park creates a watercourse that runs up to 3 km. south into the desert, which floods a few hectares depending on water supply. Stands of reeds totalling approximately 2-3 ha. are present in a 10-20 m. wide band along this watercourse but also in two or three bigger patches in flooded areas, see photo page 16. Potential food resources for the species at the site have not been investigated but fish (presumably *Tilapia* sp) have been introduced. Other potential prey includes rodents (*Mus musculus*

and *Rattus* spp.), reptiles and the larvae of various freshwater insects (particularly dragonflies). Even juveniles of other bird species breeding at the site, such as Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*, Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*, and warblers, might be preyed upon. No amphibians have been recorded.

The site offers only a restricted range of suitable habitats for Purple Heron or other water birds; but several other similar sites within a 15 km. radius constitute a functional network of suitable wetlands between which waterbirds can move. These include the Green Mubazzarah, Zakher pool, quarries of the cement factory, Al Ain Water treatment plant, Wadi Al Ain and the Palm sport resort (all VA25). Although these sites are man-made artificial habitats with no guaranteed future or an assured supply of water, they at least temporarily provide alternative freshwater habitats, and a modest compensation against the general worldwide trend of freshwater habitat loss. In this context, Zakher pool represents an important freshwater site in the Al Ain region. Created in 2004 to accommodate the excess water of the Al Ain water table, the pool had a relatively small surface of open water up to 2008, being mainly covered by reeds (5-10ha.) which made it a suitable candidate breeding site for Purple Heron. Breeding may have already occurred there in previous years, without being noticed. In 2009, changes in Al Ain water management meant a significant increase to the water level and a nearly complete flooding of the reeds, this possibly forced Purple Herons to search for other sites. The flooded area south of Ain Al Fayda, where two adult Purple Herons were regularly observed in October-November 2012, has recently been protected and public access closed, which can offer better conditions for the species to breed again in the future, provided that no major change in water management happens.

The Purple Heron is known as a colonial breeder (Deerenberg & Hafner, 1999) but, depending on local conditions and food availability breeding by isolated pairs may occur. In the Arabian Peninsula breeding has mainly been reported from Saudi Arabia along the Red Sea coast, but also from the Riyadh (MB26) region, with an estimated total breeding population of 100 pairs (Jennings 2010). Although over-summering birds have been regularly observed in UAE, the breeding of the species has not been confirmed previously (Aspinall 2010). The persistence of suitable artificial habitats in the region of Ain al Fayda may assist the establishment of a new breeding population.

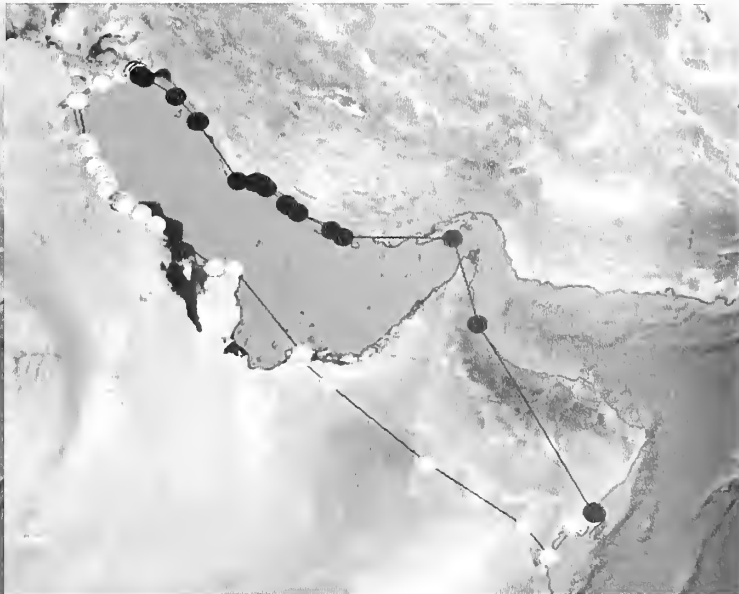
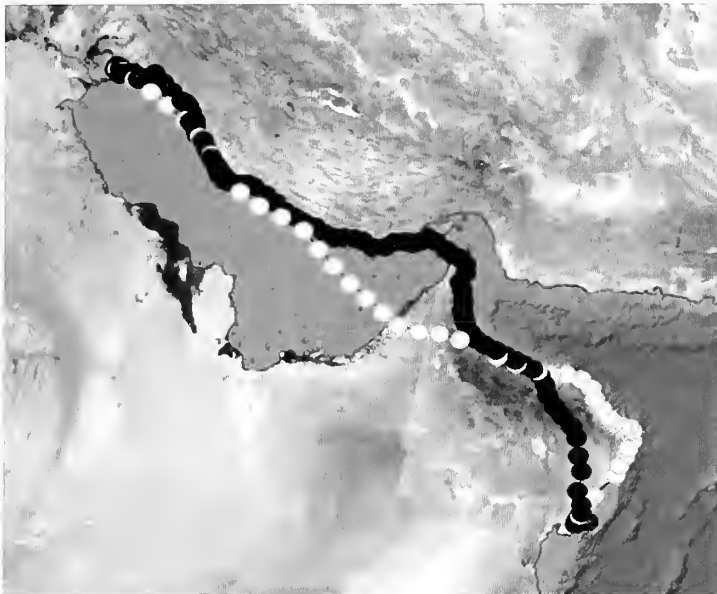
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In Brief

Birds on board ships

.....in the Red Sea: As not many people report birds at sea it is worth listing birds seen by Kevin Brewin during a two hour period on 6 October 2012 (1000 hrs - 1200hrs) when the



Clockwise from top left

Crab Plover *Dromas ardeola* migration routes; bird 446 (logging interval 30 minutes) and bird 490 (logging interval six hours) plotted on Google Earth. Black dots are spring and white dots autumn. A Crab Plover carrying a UvA GPS-tag, Barr al Hikman, December 2011. Page 10. Photo: Jan van de Kam.

Corn Crane *Crex crex* A scarce passage migrant that is regular in May at Sabkhat al Fasl, Eastern Province. Photo: Phil Roberts.



A Steppe Gull *Larus fuscus barbarensis* suffering from botulism, 4 Mar 2009, Palm Jebel Ali, UAE. Page 11. Photo: Keith Wilson.



A Collared Pratincole *Glareola pratincola* chick, June 2012 at Irkayya farm, Qatar. Two pairs bred, the first breeding record for Qatar. Reported by Jamie Buchan. Photo: Khalid Al Maadeed.



merchant vessel he was on was virtually stationary in the Red Sea at 16°45' N, 40°27' E, west of the Farasan islands (HA10), south west Saudi Arabia. During that time the following birds either touched down on board or flew over.

Quail *Coturnix coturnix* (1), Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea* (1), Grey Heron *A. cinerea*, Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* (1 male), Lanner Falcon *Falco biarmicus* (1), Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* (1), Laughing Dove *Streptopelia bengalensis* (2 juveniles), Namaqua Dove *Oena capensis* (8 adults and juveniles), European Bee-eater *Merops apiaster* (6), Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* (>10), Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis* (2), Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*, Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris* (1).

The observation of so many Namaqua Doves, including juveniles is interesting as it adds weight to the suggestion that at least part of the population leaves Arabia for Africa in the autumn.

....and in the Gulf of Oman/Arabian Gulf: The recent issue of the journal of the Royal Navy Birdwatching Society records a Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* in the Gulf of Oman at 25°03' N, 57°06' E (about 80 km. offshore) on 7 November 2011 and a Pallid Scops Owl *Otus brucei* coming on board a ship halfway between Qatar and Iran at 27°01' N, 51°06' E on 12 Nov 2011. (*Sea Swallow* 61:28,29,77).

Peanut butter as a bird table food

Peanuts are very popular on bird tables everywhere and in Jeddah chunky peanut butter is also a big hit with local birds, writes Duha al Hashemi who regularly feeds her garden birds. The following resident species have been seen to take it: Laughing Dove *Streptopelia bengalensis*, bulbuls *Pycnonotus* spp, House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* and Arabian Golden Sparrow *P. euchlorus*, weavers *Ploceus* spp and Black Bush Robin *Cercotrichas podobe*. Once a Nile Valley Sunbird *Hedydipna metallica* was seen and photographed with peanut butter on its bill but it was not actually seen to take and eat the food. Visitors which also eat peanut butter include Blackcaps *Sylvia atricapilla*, whitethroats *Sylvia* spp and Ménétries's Warbler *Sylvia mystacea*. The latter wintering species is particularly fond of this food and visits regularly, sometimes every 15-20 minutes, and takes away a chunk each time, see photo page 16.

News of bird table visitors and what they eat is added to the ABBA database and is welcomed.

A census of Collared Kingfishers at Khor Kalba, UAE, 2010 - 2011

By Oscar Campbell and Ahmed Al Ali

Khor Kalba (WA27) its mangroves and hinterland, which is part of Sharjah Emirate, situated in the south easternmost corner of the United Arab Emirates, is a fascinating and biodiverse ecosystem. Centred on a long, narrow estuary that opens into the rich waters of the Gulf of Oman at Kalba Harbour, it comprises the oldest (and hence richest) mangrove forests in the country, low beach dunes with some remaining vegetation and, just inland, Acacia plains that rise up abruptly into the eastern edge of the Hajar

mountains. This location is now the last remaining green lung on the otherwise very heavily developed east coast of the UAE, a 70km stretch from Dibba (WA28) in the north to Kalba in the south. The entire area has long been recognised as an excellent year-round birdwatching location and its flagship species is the Arabian race of the Collared Kingfisher *Todiramphus chloris kalbaensis*. Kalba is the species' only location in the UAE, see photo page 16. The taxon *kalbaensis* is near-endemic to Kalba, it has also been recorded at Khor Shinas (WA26), and Khor Liwa (WB26), respectively 25km and 60km to the south in Oman. However numbers at those sites are very small and breeding has not been confirmed. Given its small population size and restriction to a tiny area (estimated as 6 km².), the species is regarded as regionally threatened. The last complete census, carried out by the late Simon Aspinall, was in May 1995, and recorded 44-55 breeding pairs.

Results of the recent census

In 2010-2011, with the encouragement and support of the Emirates Natural History Group, the eurrent authors and Neil Tovey carried out a new population census. The results of this have been published in *Tribulus*, the journal of the Emirates Natural History Group (Campbell, Al Ali & Tovey. 2012) and are summarised below.

Four surveys of the area were made between October 2010 and May 2011, following on from partial surveys, made by kayak and completed by the authors and Nick Moran, in February 2009, and by OC in February 2010. Tidal conditions were found to be critical to a successful survey, as on high tides, even during early mornings, birds were unable to feed and so became very inactive and retiring. Birds were also significantly more obvious during the breeding season, from April onwards, when they often perched prominently and moved only short distances when approached. Calling was rarely heard, even during April and May and tape-luring at any time of year (or day) produced very little response. For these reasons, most birds were located visually, on morning visits coinciding with low tides during April and May. In total, 26 pairs were located on territory. This figure is based on surveys on two different dates because there is insufficient time within a tidal cycle to survey the whole site. It is regarded as accurate because pairs stick tightly to their territory. However, nine additional birds, clearly on territory but with no evidence of a mate, were also located. Making the reasonable assumption that these birds were indeed paired with, for example, their mate incubating, brings the total to a likely maximum population of 35 pairs. Similar reasoning was used to derive the total of 44-55 pairs in 1995. In addition, it is possible that a few pairs were missed during fieldwork (some areas of mangrove forest away from the main channels are practically inaccessible) so the total could be as high as 40 pairs but is unlikely to be any more. This most optimistic total represents a decline of 9-27% compared to the 1995 figure, and may be as much as 36% if the actual total was indeed 35 pairs. This is clearly a serious and worrying decline but, in fact, is rather less steep than many local birdwatchers feared. Khor Kalba has a number of urgent and pressing conservation concerns and, although not all of these are critical to the conservation of the Collared Kingfisher, there is hope that in the

long-term these may be in the process of being solved (see below).

Khor Kalba is also well-known for its over-wintering Indian Pond Herons *Ardeola grayii* (see photo page 16), which are easy to find, up to 22 were located during a January survey, with three still present by late April but none thereafter, and its breeding Sykes's Warblers *Iduna rama* which are thinly distributed and very elusive. Although not specifically targeted, all Sykes's Warblers noted during our survey work were mapped. Worryingly, this produced a daily maximum of only five birds and there may be as few as four to seven territories. If this is correct, the conservation status of Sykes's Warbler may be more critical than that of Collared Kingfisher and would clearly warrant further investigation.

Recent developments at Khor Kalba

Since March 2012 Khor Kalba has been fenced off, entirely restricting public access to the site. This occurred once the Environment and Protected Areas Authority for Sharjah (EPAA) had approval from the Ruler of Sharjah Emirate, HH Dr Sultan bin Muhammed Al Qasimi, to consider the site as a formally protected area, now named "Al Qurm Protected Area" (Qurm is the local name for the mangrove). Furthermore, the nearby Acacia forest was also declared protected, under the name "Al Hafyah Protected Area". This fragile and sensitive gravel plain, comprising 3.5km²., is the densest Acacia forest in the UAE and contains some trees that may exceed 80 years in age.

These protected areas form part of a wider plan, agreed between EPAA and the Sharjah Government for the area. Whilst some development is likely close to the Khor, the intention is that all projects will proceed solely on the basis of being sustainable and promoting ecotourism to the area and will only be approved subject to a strict environmental impact assessment.

Currently proposed projects are focussed on direct conservation and education. For example, Kalba Wildlife Centre will house various species from the local environment with the intention of educating local people about the area's wildlife. A proposed Birds of Prey Centre is a project to link education with entertainment as it will focus on falconry as part of the national heritage. Designated picnic areas will be open to the public on the fringes of the protected core, so giving people a chance to enjoy the local environment and learn about it through interpretation panels and displays. Henceforth public access will be strictly managed and so entirely eliminate rampant disturbance, particularly from drivers on the dunes and beach. The latter was a particularly severe problem for many years before the site was fenced off.

Local people have been hired as rangers by the EPAA, believing that they would be better placed to spread the conservation messages to the Kalba community. There is evidence that this approach has paid off. Furthermore, no less than 17 hunters and fishermen have so far been apprehended in the restricted area, for which there are penalties of up to 10,000 AED in fines or four to twelve months in jail. Other laws, including those to protect the trees, are being drawn up. As a result of surveys, some interesting recent discoveries have been made, including a hitherto unknown heritage site which indicates the broader importance of the Khor

Kalba area.

Finally, a submission concerning Khor Kalba as a wetland of international importance has been lodged with the Ramsar Convention. If successful, the site would become the most biodiverse Ramsar Site in the UAE and only the third site to gain such recognition in the country. The EPAA and local naturalists are hopeful that this will indeed be awarded as the site complies with requirement categories. With mountains, gravel plains, salt marshes and mangroves along tidal creeks, lots of beach and a rich offshore sea, Kalba is arguably the most biodiverse site in the UAE and has long merited proper protection and gazetting. Perhaps now, at last, it is finally going to get it.

Reference: Campbell, O., A. Al Ali & N. Tovey. 2012. The status of Collared Kingfisher in the United Arab Emirates, with comments on the status of Sykes's Warbler and Indian Pond Heron. *Tribulus* 20: 62-66.

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Apparent increases in Egyptian vulture populations in the Sultanate of Oman

By A. Al Bulushi, S. Al Harthi, G. Al Farsi, J. Al Araimi, and J. Al Humaidi

The Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* is the most numerous and widespread vulture in the Sultanate of Oman (Eriksen, Sargeant and Victor, 2003), but is considered to be globally endangered by Birdlife International (2012). This vulture's range extends from northern Africa and south western Europe to southern Asia and its global population, which is in decline, is estimated to be between 10,000 and 100,000 individuals (Glenn, 2006). There is a concentration of resident birds on the island of Masirah (YB18/YB17) where the most recent published information available is that about 12 breeding pairs are resident (Rogers, 1988). Masirah island is an Important Bird Area (IBA) in Oman.

In February 2012 the Environment Society of Oman (ESO) initiated a one year project funded by the Hima Fund that aimed to collect data about Egyptian Vultures within the Sultanate and to provide some training to Omani field assistants on Masirah island. The project had two phases: the first phase (February & May) aimed to estimate the size of the species' breeding population and better understand their breeding productivity on Masirah; the second phase (October) was to collect data on the distribution of these vultures at dumpsites in northern Oman and on Masirah.

The results of the first phase suggest the estimated population for Masirah island is between 65 to 80 pairs and more than 200 individuals (Environment Society of Oman, 2012). This result represents at least a four-fold increase on earlier estimates for the island. On the face of it, this result runs counter to the declining global population trend of the species. There are perhaps two alternative explanations. Firstly it is quite possible that earlier



Clockwise from top left

The UAE population of the Collared Kingfisher *Todiramphus chloris kalbaensis* has declined at its only nesting site. Page 14. Photo: Ahmed Al Ali.

Reeds along the watercourse in Ain Al Fayda where Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea* bred in 2012. Page 12. Photo: Jacky Judas.

A female Ménériés's Warblers *Sylvia mystacea* feeds regularly on chunky peanut butter at a Jedda bird table, October 2012. Page 14. Photo: Duha al Hashemi.

Up to 22 Indian Pond Herons *Ardeola grayii* were present in Kalba mangroves in January during the Collared Kingfisher *Todiramphus chloris* survey. Page 14. Photo: Ahmed Al Ali.

Squacco Herons *Ardeola ralloides* are a common passage migrant and winter visitor to Sabkhat al Fasl, Eastern Province. Photo: Phil Roherts.

The Arabian Serin *Serinus rothschildi* has recently been seen and photographed in Jedda and Riyadh. Page 21. Photo: Duha al Hashemi.



estimates of population on Masirah may not have been as thorough or complete as the 2012 survey. Secondly, because the human population on Masirah has grown in the years since the last survey*, during which time more waste is likely to have become available which can be utilised by Egyptian Vultures, we could not entirely discount the possibility that there may have been a real increase in the number of pairs breeding. Information collected at nests suggests reproductive performance on Masirah was low in 2012, compared to studies elsewhere, with 0.46 fledglings/territorial pair being produced (n=39). The study gave good opportunities for Omani field assistants to gain experience in identifying vultures and to determine their age, which would enable them to conduct regular counts at the municipal dumpsite on the island and collect breeding information in the future.

In the second phase, Egyptian Vultures were found using five of the ten dumpsites surveyed in northern Oman and on Masirah island. Juvenile Egyptian Vultures are brown and successive moults over four years result in full adults being white, with dark flight feathers. Table 1 shows the maximum numbers of these vultures, divided into "brown" (<2 yrs of age) and "white" (>2 yrs of age) birds sighted at individual dumpsites. Information on the age of vultures feeding at the dumpsites is important because it provides some insight into population age structure. It is assumed some vultures in all age classes at these sites are resident.

Table 1: Maximum numbers of Egyptian Vultures observed at dumpsites in Oman in October 2012.

Site	Brown birds	White birds
Izki (XB22)	3	15
Manah (XB22)	14	0
Masirah island (YB18)	21	42
New Al Amerat (YB23)	50	188
Quriyat (YB23)	11	144

No Egyptian Vultures were found at dumpsites at Barka (XB24), Fanja (YA23), Jebal Al Akhdar (XB23), Nizwa (XB22) or Sumail (XB23). The largest count at the New Al Amerat dumpsite (238 individuals) was on 9 October 2012.

While the data on breeding on Masirah island and the counts at dumpsites are from only a few observations within a limited time frame, they do suggest:

- Masirah has a much larger population of breeding Egyptian Vultures than was previously known;
- Oman probably holds more than 100 breeding pairs of Egyptian Vultures;
- Dumpsites in Oman are important for resident and migrant vultures;
- The use of dumpsites in Oman by Egyptian Vultures is variable, with no vultures present at some sites that had large amounts of potential food available.

Further research is necessary to better understand the numbers of migrant and resident vultures in Oman, and the distribution, ecology and productivity of the resident population. Because the Egyptian Vulture is globally endangered and populations are declining in most of its range, Oman may be particularly important in conservation terms as a home for pre-breeding birds from across much of its eastern range, and its breeding population may be a source of new recruits into the population if it starts to recover. In addition, the Egyptian Vulture and other scavenging birds provide "ecosystem services" that benefit humans in Oman and elsewhere. ESO intends to develop a plan for research and conservation activities on Egyptian Vultures, and is actively seeking the funds to do this.

* The human population of Masirah island, of approximately 7,804 in 1988, increased to 12,304 by 2013. Source: Oman National Centre for Statistics and Information, Supreme Council of Planning.

Acknowledgment: We acknowledge the Hima Fund for its interest in funding this project, Mike McGrady, Ivailo Angelov and Tsvetomira Yotsova for their cooperation in the survey.

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Some notes on breeding birds in Southern Oman

By A. Dixon

I spent a week in southern Oman from 30 March to 6 April 2012 in search of breeding birds. My time was divided between the Salalah coastal plain, the valleys of the Dhofar escarpment and the desert east of Thumrait (UA12).

In the desert east of Thumrait I located two nests of Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse *Pterocles exustus* by tracking flying birds back to their nests. The first nest was located on 30 March by watching a male back to the nest site before dusk near Aftkhayt (UB12). Although I was too far away, ca. 250 m, to actually witness an exchange in incubation duty, nevertheless, it is likely that the male relieved the female from incubation and when inspected the nest was found to contain a full clutch of three eggs. At 0800 hrs (1 hr 40 min after sunrise) the following day, the male was still on the eggs and had presumably been incubating overnight. At midday on the 1 April the female was incubating at this nest. The second nest was found on the 2 April after tracking a single flying male back to an area of desert close to an asphalt road east of Thumrait. The bird, like the previous male was very wary and undertook a long circuitous walk back to its nest despite

the fact that I was watching it from 150 m. away in a car parked at the side of a well-used road. This male eventually settled on a nest and I saw no sign of a female. On inspection, the nest held a single fresh egg and I suspect that the male had returned to the site to cover the egg during the heat of the midday sun. I checked this nest again four days later on the 6 April and found the female incubating a full clutch of three eggs in the early afternoon, see photo page 26. Both nests were in stony desert with sparse vegetation and comprised a shallow scrape in the sand; the first nest was in the open and had a layer of fine gravel under the eggs, the second nest was unlined and placed between two large stones, though with a little shade. Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse were the most abundant sandgrouse in the region, in fact I only saw one party of four high flying Crowned Sandgrouse *P. coronatus*. Most Chestnut-bellied were seen flying in small parties or pairs, but I did pick-up a few birds, in pairs and small groups on the ground, none of these were nesting or escorting chicks. It seems likely that my visit coincided with the early part of an extended breeding season for this species.

Generally birds were scarce in the desert, but those that were seen included Bar-tailed Larks *Ammomanes cinctura* and Black-crowned Sparrow-Larks *Eremopterix nigriceps* both with fledged young. Greater Hoopoe Larks *Alaemon alaudipes* were scarce, with only one individual recorded and Desert Larks *Ammomanes deserti* were only present on rocky ground above Wadi Andhur (UB12). In areas of scattered Acacias I saw a pair of non-breeding Lappet-faced Vultures *Torgos tracheliotos* and 4 m. up a spindly, solitary Acacia, I found a new but empty nest of a Brown-necked Raven *Corvus ruficollis*, a species that was surprisingly scarce in the region.

In Wadi Andhur there were several pairs of Blackstarts *Cercomela melanura* with fledged young in family parties, this species is likely to be double-brooded as one pair were observed copulating. At the Andhur pool and spring there were many White-spectacled Bulbuls *Pycnonotus xanthopygos* in the palms and Acacias, some with fledged young and others with eggs. I also observed many fledged House Buntings *Emberiza striolata* here but the Cinnamon-breasted Buntings *E. tahapisi* of this region did not have young and were apparently not yet breeding. Neither were the few pairs of Green Bee-eaters *Merops orientalis* at the oasis, as I saw three pairs spaced about 50-70 m. apart hawking from palms and there were incomplete nest tunnels in the low sandy banks of the wadi nearby. I saw a single male Hooded Wheatear *Oenanthe monacha* in this wadi but failed to relocate it the following morning.

In the Dhofar mountains I spent time searching for nests in Wadi Darbat, Ayn Hamran (both UA11) and Wadi Hanna (UB11). It was clear that many of the species of this region were not yet breeding. African Paradise Flycatchers *Terpsiphone viridis* were consorting in pairs but only one male was seen with an elongated tail, so it seems likely that this species would not start breeding in any numbers until May. Similarly, there was no evidence of breeding by Abyssinian White-eyes *Zosterops abyssinicus*, Black-crowned Tchagra *Tchagra senegalensis* or Arabian Warblers *Sylvia leucomelaena*, which were all in pairs. Shining Sunbirds *Cinnyris habessinicus* were common in Wadi Darbat and Wadi Hanna and one pair was watched nest building and a second was found with a full clutch of two eggs. Bruce's Green Pigeons *Treron waalia* were very vocal and I found several nests with two eggs, one having laid its first egg on the 2 April. Nests were typically situated 6-8 m. up in a range of tree species, including Acacia and fig, see photo page 26. I watched Rüppell's Weavers

Ploceus galbula nest building but none of the nests appeared to hold eggs at this time and its nest-parasite, the Didric Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx caprius* had not arrived in any numbers, if at all, as I did not see any in the region.

The rocky caverns of the Dhofar mountains were home to numerous Tristram's Starlings *Onychognathus tristramii*, most of which were feeding young in the nest. Many nests were situated in small hollows in the roof of the caverns, where they were presumably in competition with Rock Doves *Columba livia* that also nested in these inaccessible sites. The blue-coloured shell of hatched eggs in the faecal piles of fig seeds under the holes could sometimes be used to distinguish holes used by Tristram's Starlings from those used by Rock Doves. One nest that could be photographed held three naked and blind chicks in a nest of twigs, grasses and pigeon feathers, lined with finer twigs and green grass; it is possible that the site had been used previously by Rock Doves, see photo page 26. Similarly, many Pale Crag Martins *Ptyonoprogne obsoleta* were feeding large chicks in their feather-lined mud nests on the rock walls of the caverns, though I also found one nest with two fresh eggs. In one particularly large cavern in Wadi Darbat I watched an Arabian Wheatear *Oenanthe lugentoides* back to its nest, which held four eggs; the grass nest was in a recess with a rampart of small stones at the entrance. Arabian Partridges *Alectoris melanocephala* were common and vocal in all areas but were always seen in pairs or small groups of adults, without young. At Ayn Hamran a Bonelli's Eagle *Hieraaetus fasciatus* was seen at its nest on a high cliff and African Scops Owls *Otus senegalensis* could be heard calling from the steep rocky slopes at night.

On the coastal plain east of Salalah (UA11) I tracked down a pair of Spotted Thick-knees *Burhinus capensis* at night by following their calls, though it was clear they were not yet nesting. Kentish Plovers *Charadrius alexandrinus* had nests with eggs near the coast here and a Crested Lark *Galerida cristata* had eggs at a nest in a coastal salt marsh at Khor Taqah (UA11). In the fodder crop of a large pivot field in Salalah there were numerous Singing Bushlarks *Mirafra caudilla* and many Crested Larks, though, despite intensive and prolonged searching, I only found one nest of the former with two recently-hatched chicks. The nest of dried grasses was placed deep in cover of the grass fodder crop but didn't have the partial dome sometimes described for this species, presumably because it was already well sheltered by the fodder grass tussock. It seems likely that the majority of the bushlarks begin breeding later in the month.

The breeding season in southern Oman is likely to be affected greatly by the timing and extent of rainfall, thus a short visit can only provide a snapshot for a particular season

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The ABBA project is ongoing and collects data on the range, numbers, ecology and other aspects of resident and visiting breeding bird species in the Arabian Peninsula. If you would like to submit records to the ABBA project a set of forms and instructions (digital or hard copies) can be obtained by writing to the Coordinator Mike Jennings at Arabianbirds@dsl.pipcx.com or Warners Farm House, Warners Drove, Somersham, Cambridgeshire, UK, PE28 3WD. See also the project website (page 2).

The changing status of Egyptian Nightjar in eastern Arabia

The Egyptian Nightjar *Caprimulgus aegyptius*, see photo page 26, is an uncommon bird in Arabia. Cramp (1985) shows a fragmented summer breeding distribution with the race *C. a. saharae* breeding in north west Africa and the Nile Valley, with the nominate race breeding from Iraq and Iran to central Asia. Asian birds arrive on the breeding grounds in early April to mid-May and leave in August and September. In autumn they migrate on a broad front across Arabia from September to early November and winter in north-east Africa. Although this status is borne out by records from Arabia (Al-Sirhan 2011, Bundy *et al.* 1989, Eriksen *et al.* 2003, King 2006, Pedersen & Aspinall 2011,) there is no mention of summer or winter records from the region. Porter & Aspinall (2010) who also made no mention of summer records, recorded wintering birds in south Arabia but their map depicted only passage birds. Jennings (2010) mentioned the species as a scarce migrant and winter visitor to Arabia but that numbers are increasing, notably in the northern Arabian Gulf region, with birds present in summer since the beginning of the 21st Century in areas where freshwater can be found. He added over-summering has been noted in Kuwait and the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia and although not proven to breed it is thought likely. Summer records of the species are now regular in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain & Qatar. In the Eastern Province there have been summer records since 2004 when a pair was discovered at Khafrah Marsh (PB30) on 24 June. The possibility of this nightjar being overlooked as a breeding species at that site was briefly discussed by Meadows (2005). Since 2006 additional birds have been located in the Eastern Province at Sabkhat Al Fasl (PB31) in August with the highest count being ten birds together on 22 August 2008. Birds have been seen every year in August at this site since 2006 with others from 5 July in 2011 & 2012. Since 2010 birds have been seen during these same months in Qatar with one at Irkayya Farm (RA27), a favoured location, on 2 June 2011. In Kuwait there are summer records from Zour Port (OA34), Kabd Agricultural Research Station (NB35), up to six birds, Sabah Al-Ahmed Natural Reserve (NB36) and Yaqoub Boodai Farm at Abdali (NB37) where again up to six birds have been seen together feeding at night on insects (Gregory 2005). Birds have also been observed occasionally in Bahrain in the summer months with one at the Chicken Farm (QA29) 16 July 2012.

The summer records from June, July and August in eastern Arabia are interesting as they suggest birds are breeding, as has been speculated in Kuwait at Yaqoub Boodai Farm, Abdali (Gregory 2005) and at Khafrah Marsh (Meadows 2005). The alternative is they are very early return migrants to the region from their breeding grounds in the north. It is assumed that the birds involved are of the nominate subspecies which has bred historically from Sinai to Syria and still breeds in central Iraq, where it arrives in mid-March, is plentiful in April and departs in September, with numbers increasing in August & September (Cramp, 1985).

The species has also started wintering in very small numbers in eastern Arabia with records from the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait but not Qatar. The status in the UAE, where the first winter records were noted in 1998, is a fairly common to common passage migrant & winter visitor from September to early May with most records during December to

February. The Al Wathba Camel Racetrack (UB25) near Abu Dhabi city is a favoured site with a maximum count of 23 on 9 January 2003 and 17 September 2004 (T. Pedersen pers. comm. from UAE Bird Database). In Saudi Arabia winter numbers have been probably less than five birds in the Eastern Province and in Bahrain there has been a maximum of 10-15 birds present at any one time, but in Kuwait it is rare.

It is clear that the status of the Egyptian Nightjar species has changed in eastern Arabia in the 21st Century, with the majority of birds no longer seen during the migration periods of early November and March to mid-May. In Saudi Arabia where it was previously regarded as a vagrant it is now known as a scarce migrant, summer and winter visitor, with July & August the best period for locating them. In Qatar most sightings are also now in July & August whereas previously it was seen mostly between mid-April to late May & late August to mid-November (Jamie Buchan pers. comm.). In Kuwait summer sightings are now regular but most still occur during the main migration period, March to May (AbdulRahman Al-Sirhan pers. comm.) and on Bahrain birds are seen throughout the year with most August to December (Howard King & Brendan Kavanagh pers. comm.). In the UAE it is becoming increasingly common with the majority of records, and highest counts, occurring from December to February, with another peak of observations in September (T. Pedersen pers. comm. from UAE Bird Database).

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Tommy Pedersen who supplied all records of Egyptian Nightjar on the United Arab Emirates database as well as Jamie Buchan (Qatar), AbdulRahman Al-Sirhan (Kuwait), Philip Roberts (Saudi Arabia), Howard King (Bahrain) & Brendan Kavanagh (Bahrain) for supplying additional data from their respective countries. Brian Meadows provided a copy of his Egyptian Nightjar paper as well as additional information on summer birds seen in Saudi Arabia during 2004-2005.

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Using a trail camera to record the breeding behaviour of Saunders's Tern on Farasan Island, Saudi Arabia

Saunders's Tern *Sterna saundersi* is restricted to the northern Indian Ocean from north east Africa and Madagascar in the west to Sri Lanka in the east (del Hoyo, *et al.* 1996). In Saudi Arabia the species is well known to breed in the Red Sea and the Arabian Gulf coast and islands. Large gatherings of this species are recorded in the Arabian Gulf of Saudi Arabia in autumn with only a few observations in winter, which suggest that the species probably migrates to winter in other areas (Bundy, *et al.* 1989; Jennings 2010).

Despite its wide distribution little information is available to fully understand the breeding biology of the species. Therefore, we started a pilot study to obtain more information on the breeding biology of the species on the east part of Farasan island (IA10), south west Saudi Arabia, by using small Bushnell trail cameras. The pilot study was carried out 8-11 March 2012, when adults were incubating.

During this time we located ten nests in a small loose colony. Each nest was photographed and its location was recorded using a hand held GPS unit. Clutch size and the measurements of the eggs were also recorded. The trail cameras were used to record the incubation behaviour of adults for at least 24 hours at five nests. The cameras were positioned about 1.5 m. from each nest and programmed to record an image every minute, see photo page 26. The night vision (infra-red) capability of the camera enabled us to also record nocturnal activity. The installation of each camera took about ten minutes and it was our experience that with this minimal amount of disturbance the adults returned to the nest only a few minutes after we left the nest site. In addition to nest details and the placement of the cameras, we measured the ground surface temperature every minute at each nest for at least 24 hours using a HOBO U10 data logger. The temperature logger was placed on the surface in an open area about one metre from each nest scrape. The minimum of night-time surface temperature recorded was 22°C whereas the maximum day-time surface temperature was 48°C. We have not analysed the camera images yet, but we are planning to do that in the near future, we believe that we can reveal the incubation routine of this species. In addition, the huge diurnal variation of ground temperatures each 24 hours provided an excellent opportunity to test how adult birds cope with this harsh environment and the behavioural mechanisms they have for maintaining the optimal egg temperature during incubation to prevent egg death through hyperthermia. From our previous fieldwork we know that the predation risk to nesting Saunders's Terns and their eggs is high, so this camera technique is also ideal to identify predators' particularly nocturnal predators.

We plan to provide a summary of the results of this study in a future issue of *Phoenix*.

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Recent Reports

Thanks to all those who have sent in records to the ABBA database over the last 12 months and especially to the various country recorders for their input.

The following are a selection of some of the more interesting, unexpected or unusual records of Arabian birds received during the last year. Records are from 2012 unless noted otherwise. Not all records here have been verified or accepted by local recorders. Notes after the name of the observer are editorial comment and not necessarily part of the original report. It is often difficult to give the right credit or attribution for every record. The names shown refer more to those sending in the records and not necessarily those who might have recorded the occurrence in the first place. So apologies if records could have been more correctly attributed. Comments and corrections are always welcome, so that the ABBA database entry (and *Phoenix*) can be amended. Some of these records have been sent in by a third party or have been extracted from websites, publications or other sources.

Black Kite *Milvus migrans* Five, possibly eight, migrants al Shamal/Ras al Shindwee (RA29) 18 May and two juveniles Irkayya farm (RA27) 11-12 October (Jamie Buchan).

Bonelli's Eagle *hieraaetus fasciatus* One juvenile Irkayya farm, 25 September to at least 21 October, first record for Qatar (Jamie Buchan)

Corncrake *Crex crex* One Qaru island (OB34) Kuwait early June 2009 (Wildlife Middle East News 6: 11: 2012)

Crab Plover *Dromas ardeola* Recent work on Bubiyan island (OA36) Kuwait has found several new breeding sites for this species and the island may support 3,000 breeding pairs (Khalid al Nasrallah). Details of this species and other interesting birds breeding on Bubiyan are in preparation for publication.

Red-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus* One pair bred, the first breeding record for Qatar, at Irkayya farm, May - June. The species is thought to have bred at this location a couple of years earlier as it has been resident there in very small numbers (Jamie Buchan). See page 28.

Spur-winged Plover *Vanellus spinosus* One recorded on Tiran island (AB32) September 2012 (Francesco Germi).

Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse *Pterocles exustus* Sixty birds in three flocks feeding on grass stubble 30 December 2011 at Sahba

(NA25), 20 km. east of al Kharg, Saudi Arabia (Rob Tovey).

Spotted Eagle-Owl *Bubo africanus* Two near Al Sawadi hotel (XB24), northern Oman on 23 October 2011 (seen by a bird tour group - reported by Tim Hallchurch); another slightly further west at Suwaiq (XA24) on 6 February (John Atkins in *Oman Birder* 2012, No 6).

Asian Koel *Eudynamis scolopacea* One male at Umm Jolaq farm (RA26), 20 April to 3 May, the first record for Qatar (Jamie Buchan).

Jacobin Cuckoo *Clamator jacobinus* One giving territorial/breeding calls at East Khor (UA11), near Salalah, Oman 19 July. Breeding calls not previously heard in the area by the observer (Steve Tibbett).

White-throated Kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis* Second hand reports received in 2011 that this species has been breeding near Riyadh (probably Wadi Hanifah, MB26) for a few years. (Rob Tovey).

House Crow *Corvus splendens* One seen Sana'a (KA07) Yemen, 19 February. It seems likely that this bird was an escapee, as it is known that one was kept locally as a pet and free flown by the owner (David Stanton).

Graceful Prinia *Prinia gracilis* The bird that arrived at Thumrait (UA12) Dhofar on 31 July 2011 was still there on 1 January 2013 (Steve Tibbett).

Paddyfield Warbler *Acrocephalus agricola* One Irkayya farm, 31 December 2011 to 6 January 2012, the first record for Qatar (Jamie Buchan).

European Robin *Erithacus rubecula* One Irkayya farm, 2 March, vagrant to Qatar, third record. (Jamie Buchan).

Nile Valley Sunbird *Hedydipna metallica* Four at EB29 (between Al Ula and Khaybah) in north west Saudi Arabia on 23 January (Abdulrahman Al Sirhan). This is the northernmost record of the species in Arabia.

Arabian Serin *Serinus rothschildi* This species has been seen and photographed from 18 January 2012 in Jeddah (FA19), where it came to drink at a garden bird table (Duha al Hashemi). One or two were also seen and photographed in the Wadi Hanifah (MB26), near Riyadh, 9 August (Mohammed Alnajar). It may be that these birds are escapes rather than naturally occurring; this species was reported for sale almost every month in the Taif bird souk over a 12 month period 2010-11 (Shobrak *et al.*, *Phoenix* 28: 18-19). See photo page 16.

House Bunting *Emberiza striolata*

A male Learaig (QB26) 5 October, second Qatar record (Jamie Buchan).

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Records are still needed The 'first phase' of the ABBA project was complete in 2010 when the Atlas was published. However the database is still live and will continue to be added to. The data will also be available to anyone who needs information on Arabian birds or the region for non-commercial purposes and *Phoenix* will continue to appear each year. Readers who have records of Arabian birds, however old, and whether published or not, are urged to make contact with the Coordinator. Old records are still particularly relevant as they help to throw light on the history of population changes, range expansions and contractions. Although the ABBA database primarily concerns resident and breeding species, it is not only proved breeding information that is required, notes suggesting possible or probable breeding, particularly uncommon breeding species, are also valuable as is information on their ecology, prey and predators. Information on exotics and escaped species, ringed birds and habitats is also needed. There is still much scope for collecting breeding bird information even for common species in well trodden areas. Would observers please continue to send in records and information for their local area and remember to copy ABBA report sheets to the local bird recorder (if there is one). Any outstanding report sheets for 2012 or earlier years should be sent in as soon as possible. Individuals wishing to send records to the ABBA project will be sent an email pack including instructions

for contributors, the ABBA record forms, a list of breeding birds and so on. Email Arabianbirds@dsl.pipex.com.

The ABBA website which is due to be updated, also includes these papers. (<http://dSPACE.dial.pipex.com/arabian.birds/>)

How to obtain *Phoenix* One issue of *Phoenix* is published each year. It is issued free to all current contributors to the ABBA project and is also sent to subscribers and recent correspondents. Copies of each issue are passed to all natural history and similar groups active in Arabia. It is available on subscription for a single payment for the next five issues, i.e. Nos 30-34. The annual subscription for addresses within UK remains at £25 (€35/\$45) for the five issues. Unfortunately UK postage costs increases in 2012 mean that it is now much more expensive to send copies to addresses outside the UK, so subscriptions for an address not in the UK will in future be £30 (€40/US\$50) for the five issues. Cheques to be made payable to 'M C Jennings'. Because of excessive bank charges for handling foreign cheques those not having access to a UK bank account are asked to pay in Sterling (£), Euro (€), US\$ banknotes, or the equivalent in the currencies of the Arabian Peninsula. Subscribers will notice that their address label includes a number which indicates the last number of *Phoenix* they have paid for. Would subscribers please send in their new subscription before their old one runs out to avoid the time and expense of reminders. Subscribers to *Phoenix* are also entitled to receive PDFs of miscellaneous ABBA publications including ABBA Survey reports. Gratis copies of *Phoenix* sent to irregular correspondents may be discontinued without warning, so to ensure you get a copy of each issue please think about subscribing. Those leaving Arabia might be interested in placing a subscription order as the price represents a small sum for all the news of Arabian birds for five years. Will subscribers please remember to advise of any change of address. Back issues of *Phoenix* (hard copies of Nos 1-28) are available at £2/€3/US\$4 each (or the whole set for £30/€40/US\$50) including postage. It is planned that the older issues will be available in PDF format in due course. When ordering *Phoenix* please say if you would like an invoice or a receipt. *Phoenix* is not available through agents.

Red-knobbed Coot - First breeding records for Dhofar, Oman

On the morning of 19 July 2012 Donnie Mackenzie and I visited the freshwater khor at Mughsayl (TB10), situated on the south coast of Oman, west of the town of Salalah. We had seen Red-knobbed Coot *Fulica cristata* at this site in February, March and May and suspected a breeding attempt might take place. I was hoping that we would find some immatures with the adults to prove breeding, but was disappointed to find only a single Common Coot *Fulica atra* present.

On our return to Salalah we decided to visit West Khor (UA10), just outside of the town. This had been the home to a long staying Red-knobbed Coot and on arrival we quickly located it in its usual feeding area. A little later I was checking out the east

side of the khor when I noticed what appeared to be a black bird sitting above the level of the water on a nest, which was placed on

the edge of a patch of reeds growing between mangrove bushes. After a few minutes the bird stood up and I could see the white frontal plate of a coot. It was some distance away but it had the look of a Red-knobbed Coot. It then sat down again and continued to do so for the rest of our stay. After a while another coot appeared at the nest and passed something to the sitting bird, this was not the bird seen earlier because that was still feeding nearby. We decided to move to the seaward end of the khor where we would be a little closer and from there we managed good enough views to be sure that both birds at the nest were Red-knobbed Coot. Just to be certain I returned the next day with a 'scope and confirmed that both had prominent red knobs and blue tinged bills.

We did not return again until 2 August when there was a bird still sitting on the nest, though moving about a lot, and its mate making rapid trips back and forth with food. It seemed obvious there were young in the nest and this was proven when two chicks were seen, one on the sitting adults back at one stage. The chicks were all black with some red on the bill/face area. Before leaving the site we went to the other end of the khor where we found two other Red-knobbed Coot. One was thought to be the first bird we saw on 19 July, the new arrival appeared somewhat immature, with small difficult-to-see red knobs and only a faint tinge of blue to the bill.

There was no indication on 2 August that the second two were behaving as a pair but on 16 August much had changed, they had obviously formed a pair and were engaging in display and having major altercations with a pair of Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* over possession of a mangrove bush. One bird was also seen carrying a long stalk of waterweed into the bush. It appeared a second nesting attempt was underway. On that day the first two adults could still be seen moving about at the first nest site.

We went back to West Khor on 4 October to check on the progress of the second pair. We found the potential nest site now high and dry due to a much lower water level and no sign of the birds, but after some time I noticed two coots emerge from reeds and mangroves further down the khor and start feeding close to the edge. Views with the 'scope showed this was indeed the second pair of Red-knobbed Coot, as one bird showed only small immature red knobs. After a minute the female came up with a morsel of food in her beak and then a week old chick came out of the reeds and took the food from her. This happened on a number of occasions, although sometimes she took food into the reeds, but only a single chick was seen. The other adult stayed close by but was not seen to feed the chick. There was no sign of the original pair or their young until an adult appeared near the original nest site where it stood preening.

When we visited West Khor on 1 January 2013 we found two adults and four half-grown brown-feathered juveniles at the site of the first nesting at the end of July. The adults were still feeding the juveniles and they were probably a second brood. A nice start to 2013.

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Olivaceous Warblers at Yanbu

By Brian Meadows

Following the discovery and description of a new subspecies, *alulensis*, of the Eastern Olivaceous Warbler *Iduna pallida** in mangroves at Alula, in north east Somalia (Ash *et al.*, 2005) and subsequent confirmation of the subspecies also occurring along the Egyptian Red Sea coast, it has been suggested (Baha el Din *et al.*, 2010) that it may occur along the entire Red Sea, where mangroves exist, as far north as Yanbu (EA25). In April, 2010 *alulensis* was reported in mangroves on the Arabian side of the Red Sea, in Yemen, in the same ABBA square (JA02) where on 21 March, 1998 two Olivaceous Warblers (race not specified) had been heard singing (Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia data base), adding to speculation that the taxon occurs further north (Baha el Din, 2011). Also, its alleged attachment to mangrove habitat (although Ash *et al.*, 2005 mention mangroves plus other coastal habitat), which is reflected in its English name of Mangrove Olivaceous Warbler (Baha el Din *et al.*, 2010, Duivendijk, 2011), has added to a claim that, as it may be uniquely adapted to mangrove stands, it could qualify as a full species under the Biological Species Concept. This note, however, reports that there is no evidence, at least to date, that it breeds in Saudi Arabia and the mapping of its range within the entire Red Sea basin (p. 489 in Kennerley & Pearson, 2010) must remain as only tentative.

Between 1 February 1984 and 12 April 1994 the author was resident at the new industrial city of Yanbu al-Sinaiyah (EA25) on the Red Sea coast of Saudi Arabia and he also travelled extensively in the coastal region between al-Wajh (CA29) and Rabigh (FA22) to the north and south of Yanbu respectively. In this area 'typical' Eastern Olivaceous Warblers, presumably of the race *elaiea*, were regular migrants in spring and autumn. However, during the second period of my residence numbers during June and early July significantly increased, coinciding with the maturation of landscaped areas (discussed in Meadows, 2003). Colonisation is known elsewhere to be rapid, as soon as conditions are suitable, such as in Riyadh and on Bahrain, although equally (there seems to be little site fidelity) numbers can also drop quickly if change of habitat occurs (ABBA data base). Neither P. J. Baldwin nor I had any June Olivaceous Warbler records from 1979 to 1987 and from 1984 to 1987, respectively (Baldwin & Meadows, 1988) but in June, 1988 I had sightings at five localities and during June, 1989 at seven sites. It was during this period after 1987 breeding almost certainly took place regularly; a presumed colony was found in tamarisks along an effluent channel and although I did not search for nests recently fledged young birds were evident in gardens nearby. Unfortunately only evidence of probable breeding was submitted to the ABBA project and as a result Jennings (2010) did not record confirmed breeding at Yanbu. It is these breeding season observations, however, which probably account for statements in the literature that *alulensis* occurs as far north as Yanbu.

Yanbu al-Sinayah is at the delta of Wadi Farah and here the coastline is fringed with stands of mangroves *Avicennia marina*. It was in these mangroves I discovered Mangrove Reed Warblers

Acrocephalus avicenniae (Meadows, 1999). Over a period of two years (1984-6) the author carried out counts of passerines while walking along transects through mangroves and the results were presented at the 7th Pan-African Ornithological Congress held in Nairobi, 1988 (Meadows, 1993). At the latter I highlighted the fact that although Olivaceous Warblers were regularly observed in the hinterland they were never found within or on mangroves. Also during a subsequent mist-netting study to colour ring Mangrove Reed Warblers between April and December, 1993 no Olivaceous Warblers were trapped despite the fact that the species had significantly increased in landscaped areas of the adjacent city during the interim period.

Searching for Mangrove Olivaceous Warblers in mangroves along the Arabian Red Sea coast during the future will, nevertheless, certainly be worth pursuing, particularly as field identification coupled with molecular studies of the genus *Iduna* advance. The mangroves at Yanbu al-Sinayah were either stunted or very young plants. I made only brief ad-hoc visits to a taller mangrove belt just north of Rabigh and to a stand with mature *Rhizophora mucronata* near al-Wajh; at both sites I found Clamorous Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus* but not Mangrove Reed Warbler. The structure of mangrove stands is probably very important for breeding warblers, particularly height, density and ratio of young to old trees. For example, it is known that there is a clear difference in the level that Clamorous and Mangrove Reed Warblers forage (pers. obs.) and Sykes's Warblers *Iduna rama* breeding in eastern Arabia apparently require tall mangroves for use as song posts (Jennings, 2010). It is informative to compare photographs taken at mangrove sites in Egypt (Baha el Din *et al.*, 2010) and Yemen (Porter & Stanton, 2011) with younger Yanbu stands at the stage of succession around 1985 (Baldwin & Meadows, 1988). Finally, the fact that Porter & Stanton, 2011 failed to find any *alulensis* at their study site in Yemen does not mean that they do not occur there; their main visit was undertaken in January and *alulensis* may prove to be a migrant. G. Nickolaus (in Kennerley & Pearson, 2010) has caught several small Olivaceous Warblers in Sudan during August-September that he considers were probably *alulensis* and Baha el Din *et al.*, 2010 state that *alulensis* is absent during the winter months in Egypt.

* I have followed Kennerley & Pearson, 2010 in placing Olivaceous Warbler in the genus *Iduna*.

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Acknowledgement: Michael Jennings kindly supplied data sheets for Olivaceous Warblers from the ABBA data base.

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Night Heron and possibly Squacco Heron breeding near Salalah, Oman

On 21 August 2012 Donnie Mackenzie and I visited Khor Taqah (UA11) on the south coast of Oman, east of Salalah. The main part of the khor consists of reedbeds, but a few hundred metres to the west is a small area of open water with large fringing mangroves. Although near the town of Taqah the area is fairly undisturbed and is used as a resting area by various herons.

We had seen up to a dozen Night Herons *Nycticorax nycticorax* at this site a couple of days previously, but considered them to be only day roosting migrants. However on 21 August I was 'scoping the mangroves when I noticed a platform of twigs half way up a bush, on which stood a large dark looking young heron. The bird was well feathered and quite mobile but still had the spiky head feathers of a nestling. After a while it moved farther back into the bush, when it became apparent that there was another nestling laid flat on the nest. From the dark brown plumage with pale spots, short heavy grey bills and short stout green legs, it was obvious these were not yet fledged Night Herons and as there were at least five adults flying about the area, it was likely that there were other nests nearby. However, not wanting to disturb the birds further, we left the area.

Whilst I was scoping the above nest, I noticed two Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides* sitting slightly higher in the same bush. These struck me as unusual for a number of reasons. For example they sat very close together and were reluctant to fly, they only moved higher in the bush when approached and then flapped and showed their white wings. What was most strange was that they both had rather bright all yellow bills, something I had never seen before on this species at any time of the year in this part of the world. As there had been a blue and black-billed adult Squaccos sat not far below these two birds when we first arrived, it occurred to me that these yellow-billed birds were recently fledged juveniles, if not from the mangrove area itself, then from the nearby reedbeds.

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The first record of Siberian Buff-bellied Pipit for Bahrain

Whilst ringing at Alba Marsh (QB29) on 20 January 2012 with Brendan Kavanagh, we caught six pipits, five were Water Pipits *Anthus spinoletta coutelli* (Caucasus race). The sixth bird superficially resembled a Water Pipit but had a very heavily streaked malar, breast and flanks and was much whiter on the under-parts than the Water Pipits, see photo page 26. BK checked the measurements which did not fit Meadow Pipit *A. pratensis* or Tree Pipit *A. trivialis*. After checking Alstrom & Mild (2003), thoughts turned to Buff-bellied Pipit *Anthus rubescens*. Following positive responses from people who had seen the species both in the field and in the hand, it was identified as a Buff-bellied Pipit of the Siberian sub-species *A. r. japonicus*.

A. r. japonicas, breeds in central & western Siberia from Tunguska to Kamchatka and south to northern Sakhalin & the Kurile islands. It winters from southern China to Japan and southwards from Pakistan to Vietnam. There are a few other records from Arabia and it is recorded regularly in Israel and Palestine, where it may overwinter with records from late October to early April (Shirihai, 1996). This is the first record of a Buff-bellied Pipit for Bahrain which would not have been recorded at all had it not been caught. The area where it was trapped is not an area where one can get good views of pipits on the ground because they are out of sight in the tamarisk and reeds and only fly when disturbed. Some birds use the site to roost and others winter but the status of this bird at the site was not clear.

This species has been recorded elsewhere in Arabia as follows:-

Kuwait: Rare - 15 records (16-19th records if accepted in January 2012)

Oman: Vagrant - six records (7th record if accepted 26th December 2011)

UAE: Vagrant (perhaps rare winter visitor) - 21 records

There are no records from Qatar, Saudi Arabia or Yemen.

References: ● Alstrom P. & C. Mild. 2003. Pipits & Wagtails of Europe, Asia and North America, Helm London. ● Shirihai, H. 1996. The Birds of Israel. Academic Press, London.

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An exceptional influx of Jouanin's Petrels into UAE waters

By Oscar Campbell and Mark Smiles

Jouanin's Petrel *Bulweria fallax* is surely one of the most enigmatic of Arabian breeding species. Described for science as recently as 1955, it can be observed, at least in small numbers, from Omani headlands for much of the year. It is a true wanderer, with records from as far afield as the Mediterranean, Hawaii and

Australia and yet up until very recently has been regarded as an exceptional vagrant to the Gulf of Oman waters of the United Arab Emirates, despite being recorded regularly as close as Muscat (YB24). The only known breeding grounds for the species, on cliffs at the western end (TA02) of Socotra island, were discovered as recently as 2000 and the species has yet to be confirmed as nesting elsewhere, despite strong circumstantial evidence that it may do so in south eastern Oman.

In the UAE, Jouanin's Petrel was recorded for the first time in October 2004. This remained the only record until August 2011 when an intensive series of boat trips specifically to hunt for rare seabirds in inshore and offshore waters off the UAE's east coast, begun in summer 2010 by a keen band of UAE birders, finally paid dividends. The species was first detected in that year on 12 August 2011, with another single seen on 19 August, followed by two birds located on three trips between 26 August and 17 September. All were at ranges of between 30 and 50 km. offshore and these records came at the end of a particularly exciting summer of pelagic birding, with species such as Red-footed Booby *Sula sula*, Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris (diomedea) borealis* and Swinhoe's Petrel *Oceanodroma monorhis* all recorded.

In the light of this, hopes for a repeat performance in 2012 were high. However, near-weekly trips from April to September produced just small numbers of mainly predictable species and, by the end of September, most resident birders had elected to stick to terrestrial birding for the rest of the autumn. For this reason, events on 24 October and subsequently, seem all the more incredible: sailing out of Kalba (WA27) on a deepwater fishing trip, Abdulla al Zaabi, our captain on almost all boat trips taken since 2010, reported finding some 300 Jouanin's Petrels, in loafing rafts of up to 60 birds. Boat trips with birders on board were soon arranged and subsequent counts included 150 and 100 on 9 and 16 November respectively and an unprecedented 609, again in sizeable concentrations, on 21 December. Virtually all the birds were far offshore, mostly at ranges exceeding 30-35 km. (apart from one noteworthy individual mentioned below) in an area extending ca. 10km northwards from the southern UAE-Oman territorial boundary, where Jouanin's Petrel proved to be the most numerous species by some margin.

During the November trips, most petrels were detected in flight either as singles or in groups of two or three but, in addition, small parties were observed loafing on the sea, although these were invariably small (up to a maximum of about eight birds) and would readily fly if approached too closely. However, both the October and December trips encountered far greater concentrations, and on the latter voyage on a mirror-calm sea, it was almost impossible, once in the appropriate zone, not to be able to spot at least one bird when scanning. More typically though, groups of 10-20 were encountered, with a maximum of over 90 on one occasion.

Throughout the trips, none of the petrels were observed

attempting to feed or forage, save for on 16 November when one group of four birds was observed squabbling over a dead squid floating on the surface. None of the birds within this group allowed the others more than a few pecks at the corpse before continuing the harassment. This accords with the dietary information presented on the species in Jennings (2010), which notes that seven species of cephalopods have been obtained from the guts (or gut regurgitates) of this species. Jouanin's Petrel is suspected to feed mainly at night and our observations in the UAE do not contradict this.

The only interactions between petrels and other species was observed on 9 November. Two sub-adult Long-tailed Skuas *Stercorarius longicaudus* were noted flying together on that date, and were tracked for some time by the boat. On two occasions, one individual was seen to make short pursuits of individual petrels, presumably in an attempt to force them to disgorge. Such attempts were short-lived and their success, or otherwise, could not be determined.

Almost all the birds seen appeared to be moulting adults (see photo top left page 28), with brownish, worn and faded plumage and many in the process of moulting primary feathers; a clear moult contrast could be seen in, for example, the flight feathers on many. However one bird, interestingly the very first individual seen on 9 November at a distance of 20 km. offshore (and therefore much closer inshore than all other sightings), was, on later examination of photographs, found to be considerably darker and noticeably fresh looking. With immaculate, much blacker plumage and a pale trailing edge to the flight feathers, this bird was presumably a juvenile and may well represent the first juvenile documented at sea away from Socotran waters. See photo top right page 28. On Socotra very recently fledged young were observed on the sea near colonies in November. The occurrence of a juvenile in UAE waters on 9 November could indicate fledging in October (or even earlier?), or, perhaps more likely, further circumstantial evidence that the species breeds rather closer to the UAE than Socotra island.

It is hoped that with continued ornithological exploration of these UAE waters, more can be learned about the occurrence and distribution of Jouanin's Petrel in this area and the unique nature of this event (or otherwise) can be ascertained.

Acknowledgements: We are grateful to the many UAE birders who took part in these boat trips, both in 2012 and in previous years. We are also grateful to Richard Porter for advice and comments on ageing these petrels.

Reference: Jennings, M. C . 2010. Atlas of the breeding birds of Arabia. *Fauna of Arabia* 25.

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Clockwise from top left

Breeding birds in southern Oman, a Bruce's Green Pigeon *Treron waalia* nests in a fig tree, a female Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse *Pterocles exustus* incubates in the desert and a brood of Tristram's Starlings *Onychognathus tristramii* in a small hollow in the roof of a cavern. Page 17. Photos: Andrew Dixon.

The status of the Egyptian Nightjar *Caprimulgus aegyptius* is changing in eastern Arabia, it is much more common in summer and winter than previously. It is regular in July and August at Sabkhat al Fasl, Eastern Province. Page 19. Photo: Phil Roberts.



The first Siberian Buff-bellied Pipit *Anthus rubescens japonicas* for Bahrain, Alba Marsh, 20 February 2012. Page 24. Photo: Jem Babbington.

Trail camera studies of Saunders's Tern *Sterna saundersi* on Farasan island hope to reveal more of its breeding biology, its predators and ability to cope with 50°C ground temperatures whilst incubating. Page 20. Photo: Mohammed Shobrak.



Sadly not all those interested in birds at Sabkhat al Fasl are there to watch them. These remains of Greater Flamingos *Phoenicopterus roseus* suggest some are hunted for food. Photo: Phil Roberts.



First Record of Black-winged Kite in the Eastern Province

Dhahran (QA29) in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia has plenty of good bird watching sites that attract numbers of passage migrants during the spring and autumn, as well as wintering species, such as ducks. One of the best sites located in Dhahran hills, is a sewage effluent pond with adjacent spray fields and an area of scrubby desert. The pond is fringed by trees on all sides.

While bird watching at this site on the morning of 29 March 2012 at about 9.00 hrs I saw a small raptor perched in a dead tree. Closer examination revealed that it was a Black-winged Kite *Elanus caeruleus*. Identification was straightforward as this species is unmistakable. This is the first record of the species from the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. It is noteworthy that the first record of this bird from Bahrain was reported on 2 March 2012 and it is even possible that the one near Dhahran was the same individual that was seen on Bahrain four weeks earlier. The bird was still in the area in the afternoon when it was possible to take a few photographs, see photo page 28. It was seen again hunting over the spray fields adjacent to the sewage effluent pond until 24 April.

Further research by Jem Babbington (www.BirdsofSaudiArabia.com) suggests this bird was of the eastern sub-species *E. c. vociferous*, because it showed dark secondaries on the underwing, which contrasts with white secondaries on the underwing of the nominate race of south west Arabia, Africa and Europe. *Vociferous* has a range from Pakistan to Eastern China and the Malay Peninsula.

This record and regular records from Kuwait, the UAE and Oman and recent breeding in Iraq, all indicate that a range expansion of the eastern population is in progress.

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Credits: Photos are credited on the page they appear. Many thanks to all the photographers shown for allowing their work to be reproduced in *Phoenix* without charge. In each case the photographer retains the copyright to their work and these pictures may not be reproduced elsewhere without their permission. I am most grateful again to Khaled Al-Ghanem of Kuwait for kindly translating the contents list into Arabic. Carol Qirreh provided indispensable help at all stages in the preparation of this issue. Printed by Impressions, 93 High Street, Somersham, Cambridgeshire, PE28 3EE, UK.

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Details of how to obtain *Phoenix* are at page 22.

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Clockwise from top left.



There was an exceptional influx of Jouanin's Petrel *Bulweria fallax* to UAE waters in late 2012. Left adult in moult with some very worn primaries, right fresh juvenile. Page 24. Photos: Oscar Campbell.

The first Black-winged Kite *Elanus caeruleus* in the Eastern Province, Dhahran March 2012. Page 27. Photo: Phil Roberts.

Goliath Heron *Ardea goliath* nest site with eggs, Farasan islands (HA10) November 2012. Photo: Chris Bowden.

A large Red-wattled Plover *Vanellus indicus* chick, first breeding in Qatar. Page 20. Photo: Khalid Al Maadeed

